
# Philosophy Without Letters: Giorgio Agamben and Indigenous Sovereignty

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## Note on Citations

Following methodological considerations all citations from Giorgio Agamben are italicised in order to clearly distinguish them from other sources and from the main text.

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# Thesis Abstract

This thesis critically discusses the history of Ontology understood as the implication of 'being' within a semiotic and phonetic conception of language. Ontology owes its coherence as a cultural apparatus to the Ancient Greek transformation of the alphabet into a total system of vocalic notation – an unprecedented and revolutionary cultural project that rendered 'language' recognisable as an autonomous and hence fully analysable entity. Alphabetisation, in its ancient Greek form, was an originary apparatus of domination aimed at the colonisation of everyday speech for the sake of administration. My analysis shows that the dominance of the semiotic conception of language allows for the development of the science of Grammar and the foreclosure of any linguistic dimension resistant to total alphabetic phonetisation. Philosophy is the discourse that emerges alongside, meditates on the meaning and consequences of, and calls into question this epochal transformation of human speech.

Giorgio Agamben's archaeology of Ontology shows that Aristotle's Ontology also gave rise to the modern 'scientific' concept of 'Life' as a sacred political and cultural referent. The sanctity of 'Life' emerges alongside the birth of Ontology as a consequence of the way Aristotle naturalises the alphabet as the ultimate code of human speech. As a result, 'Life' as a unitary referent owes it coherence to a logical-political operation rather than a natural or religious one. Therefore, only an examination of the way in which Ontology is developed and functions can allow for a consideration of a different conception of language and life.

Despite pointing to the limit of a certain dominant conception of politics and language, Agamben's philosophical practice remains within the orbit of Greek Ontology and Western nihilism. This fails to orient us in light of the immense challenges posed to settler societies faced with the claims of indigenous sovereignty. Agamben's philosophy assist us in redrawing the boundaries of settler culture in order to better learn how to exit from it – therein lies the importance of studying his work in order to better understand the apparatuses governing our societies and conceptions of humanity. Ultimately, this will only show us the door without opening it for us. It is therefore necessary to move completely beyond the domain of Ontology as handed down by the philosophical tradition in order to make ourselves available for the only political practice that constitutes a task for our era: the development of conditions ripe for the reassertion of Indigenous Sovereignty.

# Preface

In a Preface to a series of essays reflecting on the methodology that guides his philosophical investigations, somewhat of a personal reflection on the plausibility and possibility of articulating a method in the first place, Giorgio Agamben states a number of presuppositions that motivate his thought. Prior to elaborating the specific origin and meaning of the various technical terms deployed in his work, and in line with some venerable ancestors equally as blessed with astute dialectical sensibility, Agamben begins by reminding the reader that, in distinction to the empirical sciences, philosophical inquiry in the human sciences demands that *"a reflection on method usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it"* (Agamben, 2009, Preface).

As Agamben reflects: "*every inquiry in the human sciences-must retrace its own trajectory back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematised. Only a thought that does not conceal its own unsaid- but constantly takes it up and elaborates it- may eventually lay claim to originality*." (Agamben, Ibid.) The originality in question is not a matter of invention out of nothing, something contemporary ideology mercilessly demands. A work that was based on such a demand, far from reflecting any meaningful obscurity, would either result in the most solipsistic abstraction or deceive itself as to its distinction from well-worn common sense and forms of presentation. The obscurity in question is far more modest and relates to experiences, which, having seized the researcher, writer or activist with such force, appear as if coming from elsewhere and therefore can only be understood in the most impersonal manner.

Due to the interminability of any genuine philosophical questioning, it is only after one has seen or lived through the consequences of questions guiding their inquiry that the path they took is illuminated as a coherent set of steps rather than the series of false starts, deviations and long journeys down roads that despite their experiential worthiness ultimately led nowhere, until finally arriving at a temporary point of repose that allows for retrospective reflection.

This retrospectivity is not of a historical nature or a conclusive summary judgment as Hegel thought. Rather, it is an opportunity to be reminded of the unthematised and unsaid motivations of the work in question in an attempt to renew the inquiry by seeking nourishment from what makes it a singular experience.

Elsewhere in his writing (Agamben,1993b), Agamben describes love as that which requires a common experience that is based on the mutual devotion by the lovers, over and above any particular property or feature of their appearance and life, to the very existence of their beloved. By analogy, philosophical inquiry reveals the common and inarticulable medium through which human beings live - the experience of having language.

Language is the fundamental attunement or mood within and through which human beings exist - it is the very element of community. A philosophical inquiry that seeks to develop the unsaid mood and motivation of a particular thinker or the sensibility through which a concept becomes intelligible must do so by pointing to a particular experience of language which ignites the philosophical inquiry in question. It reflects on the very aspect of the work that can only be articulated by reactivating within it whatever makes it common.

As Agamben repeatedly attempts to show, and as will become clearer in the rest of this work, human language is not merely a tool for communication of elements or experiences external to it but the very medium through which experience itself becomes possible. For in the same way as one cannot have a private language, one cannot have a common experience without that experience being referred to at least the possibility of its articulation, even if words go missing, or we prefer not to say a thing. The being of language is such that it matters not if we can't find the right words. Indeed, language often fails to express the matter at hand not because it is removed from the authentic element of an experience which we assume to be non-linguistic but because, like love, it is already an element of the experience. The commonality of the experience has already been communicated before it was articulated through this or that particular word.

Devoted to an exposition of "*that which was never written*", philosophical reflection aims at exposing the unsaid that lies at the origin of every inquiry but tries to grasp the element of a work or a life that avails itself to elaboration and interpretation beyond the ability of any individual to carry out themselves alone. That is, no matter how personal it seems, philosophy should only be taken up in common and articulated through a friendly confrontation with fellow travellers. This is why "*doctrine may legitimately be exposed only in the form of interpretation*" (Agamben, 2009, Preface) to the point where the distinction between what is written about and who is writing is imperceptible. If conducted properly *"method shares with logic its inability to separate itself completely from its context*." (Agamben, Ibid.)

In honour of a thinker who insists that that which is most silent and singular is that which is held in common, the philosophical motivations of this inquiry must be brought to full light. This ‘thesis’ is born out of years of ‘spiritual emergency’ and crisis experienced by its author, but shared by many, as exogenous as it was sudden, which was beyond articulation, and which no explanation or diagnosis, medical or narrowly biographical has ever adequately comprehended. It is only through the engagement and struggle with Agamben’s writings and the political experiences which this struggle afforded, that the crisis transformed from a private and silent experience to a shared mood, which is as philosophical as it is political. It was only then that I began to understand that the crisis in question was, far from a privation or pathology, nothing other than an experience that exposed existence as a common dwelling in language, beyond all personal identity or interested concern; a crisis of being human as such. In other words, it was an exposition of philosophy itself which showed beyond all doubt that life is always held within the very common element that binds human beings together. It is only through philosophical inquiry, true to its politico-therapeutic vocation, and not through the administration of normative medicine, economic governmentally or pseudo-religiosity, that the spiritual crisis of the age can be addressed. It is as an attempted vindication of philosophy and in the name of philosophical existence in common that this thesis should be read.

# Introduction

This thesis critically discusses the history of Ontology understood as the implication of 'being' within a semiotic and phonetic conception of language. Ontology owes its coherence as a cultural apparatus to the Ancient Greek transformation of the alphabet into a total system of vocalic notation – an unprecedented and revolutionary cultural project that rendered 'language' recognisable as an autonomous and hence analysable entity. My analysis shows that the dominance of the semiotic conception of language allows for the development of the science of Grammar and the foreclosure of any linguistic dimension resistant to total alphabetic phonetisation. Giorgio Agamben's archaeology of Ontology shows that this apparatus has also given rise to the modern 'scientific' concept of 'Life' as a sacred political and cultural referent. The sanctity of 'Life' emerges alongside the birth of Ontology as a consequence of the way Aristotle naturalises the alphabet as the ultimate code of human speech. As a result, 'Life' as a unitary referent owes it coherence to a logical-political operation not a natural or religious one. Therefore, only an examination of the way in which Ontology is developed and how it functions can allow for a consideration of a different conception of life.

The place where semiotics and generic life are implicated most decisively, to the point that they are no longer distinguishable, is through construction of Ontology in the works of Aristotle. The way that the philosophical tradition has conceived of the relation between language and the world is expressed most decisively in Aristotelian metaphysics which presents a synthesis of the philosophical project to render the world sayable and rational; the transformation of nature into 'that which can be said: *"Ontology thinks being insofar as it is said and called into question in language, which is to say that it is constitutively Onto-logy*" (Agamben, 2017, 1146).

In order to render 'being' sayable, Aristotle divides being into two. Being is divided into a substance or foundation (*arche*) which cannot be said and upon which that which is said about is based. That which cannot be said becomes the basis upon which things are said about it. When Aristotle divides being into two planes he searches for a way to unite these two elements and ask how can that which is presupposed be united with that which is said about it? In order to do so he introduces temporality into being and language which results in a removal of the '*arche*' into a temporal past which is articulated 'historically' through the things said about

it. History is therefore, over and above any chronology, an articulation of the very foundation upon which language is said to be possible. But in this way, what was divided is held together on the basis of a hidden and strategically invented foundation.

In the same way in which being is thought 'to be said' it is claimed that human beings are said to have language – the way this is articulated is by splitting living beings into various types of existence and placing a generic and common sense of living at the bottom as a foundation (what Aristotle calls nutritive life and modern science refers to as 'Life' understood as a minimal biological quanta). 'Language' is that which is added to life as a supplement that is also said to 'politicise' humanity. For the Ontological apparatus, *"if being is divided in the logos and nevertheless not irreducibly split, if it is possible to think the identity of the singular existent, then upon this divided and articulated identity it will possible to found a political order, a city and not simply a pasture for animals*" (Agamben, 2017, 1146)

Sharing in a generic life said to inhere in all living beings, humanity is also allegedly gifted with a supplement of language understood as a political capability. Politics is therefore understood as a capacity carried out as a result of the way generic human life can articulate itself through speech. Nutritive life, which serves as the foundation for language, is not able to be recognised as political in itself but only insofar as it is merely a backdrop or hidden element which allows a particular form of speech, hence a particular culture, to take place.

Aristotle could only mobilise language in such a way because he had the Ancient Greek alphabet at his disposal, which in distinction to its predecessors claimed to regulate all human speech into indivisible elements represented by letters. As we shall see, Ontology becomes possible as a science only once Aristotle can claim that the Alphabet regulates human speech and, through the articulation of letters, allows for a distinction between human and animal language. For Aristotle, it is the total capture of speech in the form of writable elements that distinguishes human beings from other living beings insofar as it enables them to become political. The Ontological apparatus that separates being from its referent and life from its form, functions through the power of alphabetic letters to regulate human speech to the point where it is 'politicised' as a defining essence of the species. Therefore, any critique of 'Life' must at the same time be a critique of Ontology and an interrogation of the function of alphabetisation in the construction of Western science and culture.

The science that Aristotle developed determined not only the nature of being insofar as it is said but also the nature of human being as a living being that can speak of the world in particular way. The method that Aristotle devised implicates human beings in language in such a way that it puts their political and physical existence at stake in the very words they speak. For that reason, reflection on language is always already political and anthropological. The same tradition that posits the relation between being and world in the form of the presupposition posits that the human being is an animal that has a language that operates in this way. The alphabet as a theory of elements of nature conditioned the development of Ontology and science, and therefore in a crucial way enabled those structures of thought to dominate the world as we know it – don't we refer to genes as the letters of nature, and the periodic table as a system of elements? This is more than just a borrowing of terms or a neutral custom. It reflects the profound influence alphabetisation has on our conception of the universe. But if language is Ontology, then language also determines how human beings have and create a world, so a shift away from such a conception requires a change in the relationship between human beings and language, and therefore requires a critique of Ontology: "*to every change in Ontology there corresponds, therefore, not a change in the 'destiny' but in the complex of possibilities that the articulation between language and world has disclosed as 'history' to the living beings of the species Homo Sapiens"(*Agamben, 2017, 1127).

As we shall see, Ontology always begins as a history and a presupposition through an exclusion and occlusion of its foundation. That which is excluded from language as a foundation is that which enables language to cohere as an autonomous system of signs or Grammar. As a result of transforming what it excludes into a hidden and past origin it appears to have a foundation. This foundation also destines and commands (hence it is referred to as an *arche*) and turns Grammar into an index of historical progression. If our culture today seems to have abandoned its historical dimension, celebrating the triumph of capitalism in the form of an end of history, this also means that it has also abandoned the relationship to language that enabled historical reflection in the first place- that Ontology may no longer be operative. Language has potentially ceased to function historically but instead has become naturalized through the domination of bio-neurological scientific ideology. But the correlation between global capitalism and the naturalization of language in the form of contemporary nihilism is not a coincidence but a logical development of a global culture that has abandoned an interpretation or relation to language that for millennia has provided humanity with a sense of a historical destiny and mission. Agamben's project is to investigate whether an alternative to this tradition is possible: "*it is from this perspective that we are seeking to trace out- even if purely in the form of a summary sketch – an archaeology of*

*Ontology, or more precisely, a genealogy of the Ontological apparatus that has functioned for two millennia as a historical a priori of the West. If Ontology is first of all a hodology, which is to say, the way being always historically opens toward itself, it is the existence today of something like a hodos or a way that we seek to interrogate, by asking ourselves whether the track that seems to be interrupted or lost can be taken up again or instead must be definitively abandoned*" (Agamben, 2017, 1129).

Agamben's project attempts to articulate the way that Aristotelian Ontology is assimilated by linguistics and modern philosophy leading into a philosophical dead end which is at the same time a political/cultural crisis**.** Agamben's project allows us to expose the limits of the Aristotelian Ontological apparatus and the semiotic conception of language that has dominated Western reflections of language ever since. By exposing the connection between this apparatus and the concept of life underpinning our legal and scientific institutions and practices Agamben wishes to search for alternative notions of both life and language – they are inseparable- in order to begin to think of a new form of politics.

Agamben's philosophy helps us see that political sovereignty, along with the legal and administrative systems that enable it to operate, relies on the same mechanism that enables written signs to capture human speech and transform it into 'Grammar' or 'signification'. Politics and Language are both part of the same Ontological apparatus that takes linguistic signification for granted as a presupposition. The government of living beings operates through the government of living speech, and only if language is captured in signification is something like a government of the living conceivable. It is this mechanism, which Agamben calls by various names such as 'state of exception', 'mystery of separation' or 'apparatus of capture' (Agamben 2017), that we need to interrogate.

The historical implication of linguistics and philology in colonial administration has been documented extensively, most notably in Edward Said's pathbreaking study of 'Orientalism' (Said,1978) and more recently in Joseph Errington's *Linguistics in a Colonial World* (Errington 2008) which, on top of recounting the colonial transformation of the native languages that survived colonisation into scientific objects of administration, exposes the hollowness of contemporary cognitive linguistics' claim to have done with its colonial heritage.

Errington explains how when the first Spanish colonialists evaluated the 'humanity' of the seemingly unintelligible non-European languages and peoples' they encountered in their conquests they faced

two options : “If speech-like sounds were judged to fall beyond the pale of language, then the creatures producing them fell beyond the pale of humanity, and issues of commonality need not enter into any calculation of advantage and obligation. But if those sounds were to be counted as instances of a human language, however opaque and meaningless, then their producers could be immediately assimilated not just to the category of human, but to European interests”. (Errington, 2008,24)

This led to the all-too familiar and fatal colonial policy regarding non-European peoples which was justified by the idea that “the nonintelligibility of speech provided sufficient grounds for subjugating them because it was evidence not of their difference, but their deficiency” (Errington, 2008, 26) Errington, like many other scholars of colonialism, explained how for the colonists the self-evidence of the meaningfulness of their own speech served as a principle that determined their evaluation of the meaning, or lack thereof, of other languages. Beyond assumptions of universality, it is in fact the ‘self-evidence’ and self-referentiality of language that allowed for a murderous relationship to other cultures.

The question that needs to be raised therefore is not only how ‘difference’ was interpreted as ‘deficiency’ but, how is it that the meaning of language is thought to be ‘self-evident’ and self-referential’ in such a way that it justifies genocide?

The ability of colonial administrations to mobilise linguistics for the sake of domination was afforded by the philosophical and ideological tradition underpinning the dominant European understanding of language. It is this ideological configuration that we intend to explore and trace back to the philosophical tradition formalised in Aristotle’s Ontology. This Ontology owes its coherence ultimately to the Greek formalisation of the alphabet as a totalised phonetic system which claimed and managed to capture the human voice and render it always already writeable. The very faculty of speech that affords human community would henceforth be politicised as a ‘self-evident’ instrument of exclusion and domination.

A significant amount of scholarship has been dedicated to Giorgio Agamben’s work, ranging from philosophy of language studies, theology, political theory, to aesthetics and contemporary studies of Ontology (Attel 2014, Heron 2018 Whyte 2003, Abbott 2016, Mills 2008). Despite the wealth of analysis and discussion an appreciation of the consequences of some fundamental elements of his philosophy remains lacking. Recognised on the one hand as a theorist of sovereignty and biopolitics and on the other as a philosopher of language and poetics, the relationship between politics and

language in his work has, at least in English language publications, not been sufficiently interrogated and hence not sufficiently understood. Even in those studies which recognise the connection between language and life in his work (Attel 2014), discussion centres more around a scholarly articulation of the way in which themes that are prominent in the so called early linguistic period resurface in the apparently, all of a sudden, later political period. It is one thing to state that a philosopher maintains thematic consistency throughout their oeuvre, it is another to attempt to understand why this is the case.

Much ink has been spilt on articulating Agamben's ideas in relation to thinkers like Arendt, Foucault and Schmitt. This makes a lot of sense given that these are thinkers he mentions directly and names them as signposts and influences. But the particular conclusions Agamben reaches about modern life and the relation between life and language are not understandable only from the vantage point of a particular thinker he is influenced by or directly argues against. The heavy focus scholars have placed on Arendt and Foucault, perhaps as a result of unconscious academic disciplinary habits, has, despite some interesting comparative studies, occluded much of what is actually interesting about Agamben's work. Even in the case of Heidegger and Benjamin, to both of whom Agamben is profoundly indebted, we can still not easily ascertain the coherence of his positions only from a reading of his relation to those thinkers. This is particularly the case with Heidegger, someone Agamben explicitly criticises at many points in his work to the point that it's doubtful he remains faithful to Heidegger's project. In any case, what has never been rendered explicit in discussions about the Agamben, is that his work is responding much more to Ivan Illich's (still timely) concerns and that he is attempting to search for a way to fulfil Nietzsche's project to 'rid us of Grammar'. This thesis fills that scholarly gap.

Following Walter Benjamin's lead, Agamben has described his philosophy as a form of political and cultural messianism (Agamben 2005, 2017). Reading his work in terms of the antinomian legacies of Jewish and Pauline messianism that Agamben espouses scholars have debated whether this messianism amounts to a demand or expectation of a complete overthrow of legality (Critchley 2013), or a call for a utilisation of law separated from its obligatory and punitive power (Sawzcynski 2019). There is doubt that Agamben's work and ideas are antinomian. His critiques of both sovereign power and chronological time are developed in several texts (Agamben, 1993, 2005, 2017) Nonetheless, Agamben's messianism is better understood if framed by his own insistence on the relation between sovereign power and language. In Agamben's biopolitical genealogy of western culture, the *nomos* that governs life can only be understood in relation to the *nomos* that governs language. In other words, the critique of sovereignty – the foundation of legal and political power - must go hand in hand with a

critique of the foundation of the power of law over language. In Agamben's own words, the task of philosophy is to effect within those who encounter it an '*experimentum linguae'* : an experience of language which allows human beings "to become aware of the pure fact that we speak" (Agamben 2018b, 28) It is the argument of this thesis that the experience Agamben attempts to uncover can best be accessed through a retrieval of the possibility of a language not fully captured by alphabetic notation.

It is best to honour a thinker by taking into account their own way of working and developing it in the manner which serves the needs of our time rather than only seeking to locate their work within an already circumscribed tradition or in light of questions that have already been answered. Let's then work with Agamben's thought following two philosophical practices that Agamben himself utilises. The first, *the principle of development*, is borrowed from Ludwig Feuerbach:

"*Feuerbach once wrote that the philosophical element in each work is its Entwicklungsfähigkeit, literally, its capability to be developed. If a work, be it a work of science or art or scholarship has some value, it will contain this philosophical element. It is something which remains unsaid within the work but which demands to be unfolded and worked out. By the way I think this is a very good definition of philosophy. Philosophy has no specificity, no proper territory, it is within literature, within art or science or theology or whatever, it is this element which contains a capability to be developed. In a sense philosophy is scattered in every territory. It is always a diaspora and must be recollected and gathered up. In any case this is the way I like to work, to try to discover this philosophical element, this Entwicklungsfähigkeit, in the work of the author I like."* (Agamben, 2009 Preface, 1)

This principle is coupled with another, '*the principle of ignorance'*, equally as important:

"*But then you must never forget the hermeneutic principle that Coleridge states in chapter twelve of his "Biographia Litteraria": until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding. Ignorance stands here as what the author had to leave unsaid, undeveloped, or as a potential. This ignorance names the supreme art of writing, to allow something to remain as a potential so the reader can develop it and eventually bring it to actuality" (*Agamben, 2002, 1)

Based on the dialectical principle that philosophy seeks to advance through hypotheses until it reaches something not already presupposed, the first thing to do when considering the work of a great thinker (or perhaps even anyone at all) is to ask: What if it were true? How would the world look like to us then? What would it demand of us? Only through the trial and error of experience can one ultimately decide if one is relying on a wrong hypothesis, or if one is ultimately to find oneself in the face of something not yet lived through or dreamt of.

Agamben has described his own project as a form of 'philosophical archaeology' that aims to uncover the dimensions of human life that remain resistant to or can escape the closures of administrative colonial rule (Agamben 2009 and 2017). Agamben has sought to utilise a philological rather than historical chronology in order to 'free myth from its archetypal isolation" and construct philology as a 'critical mythology' (Agamben, 1993), which lifts the historical Grammar of European culture out of historical rigidity and brings it back to life as foundational vocabulary for poetry. For what does Indo-European philology do *but generate a hypothetical and unattested origin which is restored though philological comparison?: "The historical reality of the 'roots' of Indo-European languages cannot be 'construed in an exclusively diachronic sense, as if it were merely a matter of a chronologically earlier stage of language: as a 'defined system of correspondences' it represents, instead, a present and operative tendency in the historical languages*" (Agamben, Ibid.).

Agamben's critical practice is based on this method – identifying the way in which an Indo-European 'origin' like 'sacer'(sacred), is not merely reconstructed as a historical past but rather serves as a guide for a still operative interpretive principle underpinning contemporary life. Agamben borrows the vocabulary of Indo-European in order to detach it from its coherence as real chronological historical depiction and instead utilises it as a vocabulary highlighting the way in which our fundamental cultural values and institutions are organized. Critical mythology replaces genealogy as a historical method in order to develop a strictly philosophical archaeology that seeks to recover not what lies at the origin but rather, that which, like the process of settler colonialism, is still happening and therefore can only be presented and reconstructed 'poetically' and practically, not historically. The point is not to recreate the past in order to justify a return to a purer origin but to recreate the present for the sake of creating a different reality.

In a recent interview Agamben explains that Philosophical archaeology is: "*a search for the arche, which in Greek means 'beginning' and 'commandment'. In our tradition, the beginning is both that which gives birth to something and that which commands its history. But this origin cannot be dated*

*or chronologically situated: it is a force that continues to act in the present, just as infancy, according to psychoanalysis, determines the mental activity of the adult, or like how the big bang, which, according to astrophysicists, gave birth to the Universe, continues expanding even today. The example typifying this method would be the transformation of the animal into the human (anthropogenesis), that is, an event that we imagine necessarily must have taken place, but has not finished once and for all: man is always becoming human, and thus also remains inhuman, animal. [. . .] The present is the most difficult thing for us to live. Because an origin, I repeat, is not confined to the past: it is a whirlwind, in Benjamin's very fine image, a chasm in the present. And we are drawn into this abyss. That is why the present is, par excellence, the thing that is left unlived*." (Agamben, 2004)

The ever-present possibility of that which nonetheless remains 'unlived' within language is accessed through a philosophical anthropology, or a 'critical mythology'(Agamben, 1996) that allows us to gain access to the possibilities afforded by our culture, without allowing those possibilities to determine in advance what we can or cannot say or do. Borrowing a term from Georges Dumezil, Agamben calls the persistence of this unlived 'arche' through time an 'ultra-history: "*what is described here as ultra-history is something that has not yet ceased to take place and which, exactly like the system of myth, guarantees the intelligibility of history and its synchronic coherence. From this point of view, Indo-European 'words' are equivalent to mythic names: not causes but origins*" (Agamben, 1996, 167).

The arche in question is therefore a structural, not historical origin: "*It is an origin, but an origin that is not diachronically pushed back into the past; rather it guarantees the synchronic coherence of the system. In other words, it expresses something which cannot conveniently be described either in purely diachronic terms or in exclusively synchronic terms but can be conceived only as a margin and a difference between diachrony and synchrony*." (Agamben,1996,166).

Following these methodological considerations, this thesis renders explicit that which remains implicit in Agamben's work. Agamben himself never explicitly argues that the phonetic alphabet should be considered a form of administrative or colonial capture of language. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the lines of thought that emerge from his work converge best by recognising their origin in the genesis of the ancient Greek apparatus for transcribing speech. What results from reading his work this way is the possibility of concretising his insights within the settler-colonial present with the hope of finding an exit from it.

This thesis develops a philosophical examination and reconstruction and not simply a historical demonstration. We therefore proceed archaeologically, as it were, and propose the materialistically explained, yet nonetheless speculative, and perhaps retrospective hypothesis that alphabetisation in its Greek context was an originary apparatus of domination aimed at the colonisation of everyday speech for the sake of administration. Philosophy is the discourse that emerges alongside, meditates on the meaning and consequences of, and calls into question this epochal transformation of human speech**.**

## Settling the Score – Towards Decolonisation

Giorgio Agamben's philosophy can be seen an attempt at a practical philosophical therapy aimed especially at the non-indigenous citizens of both metropolitan and settler colonial countries. The point of the therapy is to utilise philosophy to expose a type of experience of language which will redeem and liberate the colonising class from forms of oppression they inflict upon those they have conquered, and in turn has conquered them.

The context of my investigation, then, is the attempt to articulate how a specific philosophical practice can answer the political exigencies facing settler society in Australia. Seeking to respond to the momentous challenge that the promise of Indigenous Sovereignty poses to the 'being of the occupier', only a philosophical practice that understands that there is no separation between politics and Ontology and therefore a practice based on an adequate political Ontology, can assist in transforming the very being which it seeks to serve.

Agamben's philosophy demonstrates that it is not possible to separate the linguistic and the political nature of human beings. Any politics that either does away with or bases itself on an insufficient understanding of the centrality of language to human life will not measure up to the particularity of the human being. Likewise, any theory of language or linguistic analysis that pretends that language can be interrogated without taking into account the political context and at bottom political nature of human life will fall short of explaining that which it seeks to understand. Following Agamben we can not only say 'tell me what you think language is and I will show you your politics' but rather that insofar as there is language, there is politics. Any attempt to understand one without its implication

in the other, is likely to replicate the errors that have led contemporary global humanity to the dead end of a sclerotic murderous modernity.

From its inception, the philosophical and political (hence legal and ethical) tradition developed in ancient Greece, following the deployment of the Greek alphabet and taken up by our contemporary scientific culture of compulsory education and industrial employment, amounts to a form of colonisation of living beings by the very language they speak. Not just the colonisation or destruction of this or that particular language (let's say Indigenous Australian languages by the English) but the capture of the linguistic faculty or capacity a such within a system of domination. In Agamben's terms, we are engaging in a form of domination over ourselves and hence over others every time we open our mouths. This is a colonisation all them more difficult to detect as a result of being tied to such an intimate and taken for granted thing as human. The ancient Greek alphabet was not invented solely for the purpose of political domination. But it is possible to argue that it was explained and justified philosophically in that way by central figures of the philosophical tradition, beginning with the definitive political interpretation of the alphabet in Aristotle's Ontology.

There is no doubt that colonisation is undertaken by specific historical actors, and that its victims are clearly identifiable in their sufferings and heroic struggles. Nonetheless, despite the recognition of the practical colonisation of the world by Imperialist Western industrial powers, from a certain historical perspective adopted from the vantage point of our globalised humanity, we are all, or at least the majority of us, settler, indigenous, bourgeois or tribal, are in some way colonised. We are dominated by an apparatus of control that has a historical and hence traceable source. But what is historical in origin yet still in effect in the present can perhaps one day be overcome and transformed back into being only a history.

Against the overwhelming force of European cultural colonialism, colonised peoples justly struggle to preserve what remains of their traditional cultures, historical or tribal, in the name of their original and from the perspective of morbid global modernity, radically alternative ways of life. Whilst it is difficult to conclude that the ills of contemporary society can be resolved through a wholesale rejection of European inspired colonial culture, which having extended its reach to all parts of the world is no longer even said to be European but simply 'modern', the efforts of the oppressed to restore their dignity, language and land should be supported and applauded at every opportunity.

Yet, a question remains as regards the members of global society who can no longer claim to have any other culture but this one. The vast majority of human beings, at least in Westernised societies, have been raised in a world where they no longer even know that there was ever an alternative to contemporary Capitalist Realism (Fisher,2009). For this vast majority, under the assumption that cybernetic modernity is a *fait accompli*, what philosophers from Nietzsche to Heidegger diagnosed fearfully as the threat of nihilism, does not even evoke the slightest shudder. For why should one fear meaninglessness if it is taken to be the foundation for one's existence? What alternative is possible for those raised under the overwhelming force of post-Copernican cosmology that not even the Catholic church can withstand, or the intractable economic apparatus that legitimates the infinite exchangeability of all peoples, languages and things?

For those who are born without ever knowing that life was supposed to have a meaning, the recognition of an absence of any such absolute values or interpretations of life is a banality not even worth mentioning and which in polite conversation provokes the same response as a discussion about the weather. But in the banality of the age and its total lack of concern for these questions perhaps lies the greatest of possibilities. For perhaps only those who have nothing to lose can risk themselves for the sake of those who have lost everything.

Up till now, Agamben's work has been discussed in the context of decolonisation primarily with reference to the correct, yet narrow reading of his work which highlights his analysis of the Western legal apparatus. Agamben's analysis of sovereignty and bare life leads to the claim that domination in settler societies is generalised to all those who are subjected to Western law, regardless of their status as colonised or settlers. If the functioning of the legal apparatus depends on the isolation of a bare generic life in all those who come under its jurisdiction, the generalisation of 'sacrality' has become so ubiquitous as to be completely occluded: "*if today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri*" (Agamben 2017, 96).

Rifkin (2012, 2016) has discussed the political and legal aspects of Sovereign exception that render indigenous people as bare life, at once excluded from the citizenry, yet subjected to its full jurisdiction. The fiction of juridical closure is in effect premised on a '*state of exception'* which offers a form of inclusion into the nation state that buttresses its territorial power and demands the rejection of any notion of rival sovereign claims and alternative cultures. Morgenson has contributed to the discussion by showing how, whether mobilised through authoritarian or liberal settler colonies, the globalisation of "Western law incorporates

Indigenous peoples into the settler nation by simultaneously pursuing their elimination"
(Morgenson 2011, 53)

Discussing Agamben's claim, Morgenson recognises that within Agamben's thought lies a potential to critique settler colonialism insofar as it generalises domination to both settlers and indigenous tribes.Yet, Morgenson distances himself from the implication: "In such a light, Agamben's assertion might suggest that 'we' are all exposed to bare life to the extent that the colonial exception and its universalisation within Western law now mark all peoples for elimination just as Indigenous peoples always were and still are marked. Yet, conversely, if Agamben names an exception that settlers assigned to others now being potentially assigned to them, then for all of us to be exposed to bare life is to potentially position us all as settlers." (Morgenson, 2011, 73).

Ziarek has mobilised a similar critique, arguing that Agamben's generalisations do not do justice to real distinctions along the lines of gender, race, sexuality, and class, and that he thereby misses the different ways in which sovereign power operates in each case.(Ziarek, 2008) It is indeed true that different groups suffer differently under settler colonial domination, but it is also true that the distribution of oppression is managed by the same apparatus and along the same lines.

Even though a recent entire collection of essays has been dedicated to '*Agamben and Colonialism'* (Svirski and Bignall 2012), none of the articles, despite their undoubtable merits, focus on the linguistic dimension of the apparatus of domination Agamben exposes, thereby simplifying somewhat the nature of contemporary domination and avoiding the question of settler/indigenous solidarity all together.

In fact, Agamben's analysis of law and language shows that it is impossible to separate the critique of sovereignty from the critique of language. Language and people, despite being "*contingent and indefinite cultural entities*" (Agamben, 2000 ,65) are both transformed into orderable and measurable unities that are thought to be natural and eternal entities, subjected to the law and regulation, that appear necessary, despite being enacted by a governing apparatus. In the same way that the construction of a political State entails an obfuscation of the plurality of human lives, transforming them into a 'People', the construction of a language entails the obfuscation of the reality of human speech, transforming into a 'Grammar'. Jurisprudence and linguistics share a common function and complicity. Jess Whyte and Alex Murray have expressed this succinctly when they write that Agamben shows how "just as linguistics has presupposed the pure fact of language, politics, he argues, has

presupposed the *factum pluralitatis*, the pure fact that people form communities. Modern political discourse has been defined by the attempt to unify language and people, using one obscure concept in order to shed light on another." (Whyte and Murray, 2011: 9-10).The rejection of the linguistic element of Agamben's critique of Western Ontology not only leads to a simplification of his critical project but also to a misunderstanding of settler colonial rule, which seeks not only to establish administrative totalisation over the native population that it dominates but also to expropriate the cultural life of the settlers themselves so as to render them unable to conceive of an alternative and hence to construct genuine and shared settler/native cooperation and shared struggle.

There is no doubt that both the false division of the *polis* and artificial attempts at unification by settler colonial regimes are part of the legacy of European colonialism , which operates on the basis of a split foundation: "*any interpretation of the political meaning of the term people ought to start from the peculiar fact that in modern European languages this term always indicates also the poor, the underprivileged, and the excluded. The same term names the constitutive political subject as well as the class that is excluded- de facto, if not de jure -from politics*" (Agamben, 2000, 29)

Dividing the country neatly between groups according to the categories of criminology and the lense of colonialism is a strategy that aims to unify both sides through an eventual state administered reconciliation. Despite the obvious ethical difference between those who do not know what they have done and those who do not or cannot know what has been done to them - there is still a relation that brings both parties together to the scene as it were.

A decade ago, the Australian Federal government established the Referendum Council to explore and propose changes to the Commonwealth Constitution with regards to recognition of First Nations peoples. The campaign for indigenous constitutional Recognition has failed. The Government has received the final recommendations of the Referendum Council instructing to reject moves towards constitutional recognition in favour of a Treaty process and the formation of an indigenous representative body. The Referendum Council eventually adopted a watered down the principles of the Historical Uluru Statement, formulated by an overwhelming number of aboriginal delegates in May 2017. The council has subsequently been disbanded.

What does the total failure of the Recognise campaign teach us? Is it enough to listen more carefully to voices 'on the ground' and gather another panel of so-called experts? Although the crisis of legitimacy and cosmology we are undergoing has consequences for all of those living in this country,

full engagement with the impact of constitutional change on our governance structures and lives has seemingly only been undertaken by Aboriginal Australia. This question affects not only the original owners of this country but the historical identity of the nation as a whole - the status and identity of migrants and our cherished multiculturalism, the legitimacy and nature of our representative institutions and the way we understand ourselves and educate our children. How can a society that believes itself to live in an orderly cosmos with solid foundations for its institutions adapt to the fact that it rests on a ground not its own? In whose name do we speak when we talk about The Australian people? In the name of settlers, or the name of the multiple tribes? What does this failed campaign mean other than that ", *our time is nothing other than the methodical and implacable attempt to fill the split that divides the people by radically eliminating the people of the excluded."? (*Agamben, 2000, 33.) It is tempting to solve this problem by opting for a chronological solution that renders some of us as 'First Australians'- this only follows the same logic that is ensuring that soon most of us will also be the last.

In whose name and by what right do we assume there is such a thing as an Australian people if we cannot clearly articulate where sovereignty is located on this land? Or is there a better way to organise our lives and institutions in light of these challenges that does not result in a false unification of that which should always kept in mutual difference. Even the complete assimilation of the tribal men and women of this land under the law of the commonwealth, would still not amount to a sovereign foundation for the nation. A republic that claims its legitimacy in the sovereignty of the people still attempts to unify something that can never be whole.
Patrick Wolfe (2006) taught us that settler colonialism is not an event that happened once and for all in the past but is a continuing process whereby the settler population gradually replaces the native one until it is fully assimilated or annihilated.

This means that settler colonialism cannot recognise itself as a historical phenomenon, insofar as it is considered an endless process without origin. It is always happening because it apparently never happened. Ultimately, the inability to access a historical dimension in settler society, except through the consumption of spirituality, is linked to this structure of settler colonialism which, denying politics, denies those under its dominion any access to historical conflict and tradition.

Australia is conceived as a society that lives in a permanent present: "Perceiving a lack of history, a lack of conflict, and a classless circumstance are related. As well as historyless (and despite contradicting evidence) Australia has a long tradition of being represented as an exceptionally

egalitarian and classless society (again, as dialogically opposed to 'Old England'). A classless political order would be characterised by a lack of conflict that would in turn produce no history" (Veracini 2007,271)

The production of the 'new world' of settler countries like the US, Australia and Israel demands the elimination of the native population in favour of the formation of a de-historicised future oriented collective that by rejecting any historical precedent or tradition, recognises itself only as 'having always already been 'and hence unable to account for its emergence : "A settler anthropological revolution had to produce social collectives entirely projected towards the future and express a determination to reject historical and political precedents (while at the same time re-establishing new/truer traditional forms). As a result, forgetting can be understood as one trait of settler colonial collectives" (Veracini, 2007, 272).

Living in a reality without history, the settler projects himself as a hidden foundation, existing in a timeless inaccessible past of pure self-reference, as a foundation that claims no origin but itself. The legal fiction of 'terra nullius' is accompanied by a fiction of a mental and psychological 'tabula rasa' which allows for the production of a social collective that cannot acknowledge any prior inhabitants or alternative traditions and relations to land or history. This absolute and eternal fiction of sovereignty allows for the reinscription of migrants as taking precedence over native populations insofar as they too are seen to reject their past in favour of the benefits of settler society. The figures of the pioneer and 'migrant' therefore come to supplant that of the 'native', whilst 'suffering' legitimises theft rather than historical legitimacy: "Parallel to a utopian drive to build an ideal society, there is another structural reason why reference to history would not constitute an effective legitimating discursive trope in settler colonial contexts. In these formations and in typically Lockean fashion, possession flows from improvement and it is labour expended on the land rather than an historical or an ancestral relation to it that can sustain an exclusive claim.

Victimologies allow suffering (rather than, for example, prior ownership, an ancestral connection, or an aristocratic background) to become an essential vehicle for legitimacy in a settler colonial context" (Veracini, 2007, 274). At the same time, "White" Australia can only acknowledge itself as an already perfected utopian society, immune to fracture, history and traditions, allowing only for aesthetic, commercialised and privatised cultural spectacles, which under the rubric of multiculturalism, assume a common, generic and a-historical equality or 'way of life' modelled after the depoliticised settler (See also, Ghassan Hage, 1998)

As we shall see in the following chapters, the politics of identity and lifestyles are premised on the isolation of a generic and barely definable notion of 'Life' that modern science inherited from the Aristotelian Ontological apparatus. Underneath the alleged plurality of cultures and lifestyles the is said to lurk a 'bare' or 'naked' life that acts as a sacred referent for state power. Language understood as Grammar allows this generic referent to serve as the foundation upon which are inscribed various identities such as 'settler', 'indigenous' 'transgender' or 'migrant'. Agamben's achievement is to show how this silent generic referent is in fact the foundation of a totalising and universalising political and legal apparatus that abolishes any recognition of difference and plurality of forms of life in the name of a fictional unity that serves the needs of efficient and executive administration. Settler society knows no history or alternative way of life because it is the realisation of a singular and totalising Ontological framework that disavows and destroys the possibility or potential for rival or parallel ways of being.

The radical irreconcilability between indigenous and settler ontologies has been elaborated by the Goenpul tribeswoman and philosopher Aileen Morton Robinson, who in her meditation on Indigenous belonging stated how "Indigenous people cannot forget the nature of migrancy and position all non-Indigenous people as migrants and diasporic. Our Ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relationship to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This Ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy*"* (Morton Robinson 2003, 31).

On the basis of this irreconcilability, George Vassilacopolous and Toula Nicolacopolous (2014) have called for an Ontological revolution in Australia. In their *Indigenous Sovereignty and The Being of the Occupier*, perhaps the most incisive philosophico-politcal text written in Australia in the last decade, they expose how settler society is trapped in an Ontology of property and criminality that renders settlers unable to account for their own history, leaving them unable to answer the question indigenous tribes demand of them to answer: 'who are you and where do you come from'? Settler society is trapped in an irreconcilable Ontological double bind : If settlers claim that they are from here then they can do so only by effacing those who they have supplanted and annihilated in order to take their place, and if they claim that they do not originally belong here they admit that they have no other relationship to land then through expropriation and raise the question of why they are here in the first place.

Evoking the best parts of the critical theoretical tradition the authors expose the hollowness of contemporary settler consciousness: “In an act of Nietzschean resentment, white Australia has cultivated a slave morality grounded in a negative self-affirmation. Instead of the claim, ‘I come from here. You are not like me, therefore you do not belong’, the dominant white Australian asserts: ‘you do not come from here. I am not like you, therefore I *do* belong’. Might the depth of this self-denial manifest dramatically, not in any failure to embrace a more positive moral discourse but, in the fact that white Australia has yet to produce a philosophy and a history to address precisely that which is fundamental to its existence, namely our being as occupier” (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos 2014, 14).

The originality of their text lies in the fact that they call upon settler society to develop its own philosophy and history, from within its own heritage and tradition, in order to allow for a proper reckoning with our ‘being as occupiers’. The authors realise that only through a reckoning with our own history can we understand what it means to live historically in the first place, and only thereby open up the possibility of a political and cultural transformation. If we do not come to terms with what it means to live with history and tradition we will never be able to answer the question ‘where do we come from?’ and hence never live up to the demand that tribal men and women persistently and patiently make of us.

> When we say that philosophy is aimed at settlers and not indigenous people this does not assume that tribal men and women cannot or should not engage in philosophy of the Socratic/Platonic tradition. That is entirely up to them. Whilst we are arguing that settler society is in need of philosophical therapy, the same cannot necessarily be said for tribal men and women, who are perhaps already more advanced in their relationship to the original power of language than Plato or Heidegger could imagine and whose cultural resources likely contain richer reservoirs and practices than any settler culture can provide for itself. We are simply trying to avoid any prescriptive suggestions in our attempt to remain faithful allies. What we do mean, however, is that in the absence of any substantial cultural tradition that is fit to prepare us for the possibility and promise of Indigenous Sovereignty philosophy should step in to pave the way for the sake of our culture in order to allow it to serve its final historical mission of assisting in restoring the

dignity and sovereignty of the tribal cultures it controls; of offering in the most dignified and pacified fashion possible a complete surrender in the name of Indigenous Sovereignty[1].

Whether in direct relation to Agamben's work or not, the rejection of the idea that settler colonialism is a form of domination on all those who live under its rule renders all attempts at indigenous/white solidarity impotent in the face of the colonial apparatus. This is exemplified by even the most well-meaning attempts at 'decolonising solidarity', the title of the manifesto and guide written by Clare Land (2015), which is now widely circulated and read in activist circles. Land does not recognise or accept that there is any dimension to colonial culture that is not already always complicit with domination and conceives of resistance only insofar as it is in the name of indigenous suffering. Hence she can offer no alternative for settlers except gestures of self-effacement and subservience to indigenous desires as part of front-line actions against the state or corporate initiative. A similar critique can be directed against one of the largest environmental student movements in the country, Students Of Sustainability, who abstain from direct cooperation within indigenous spaces due to the fear that aboriginal activist spaces do not provide 'safe spaces' for the sensitivities of sexual identity. They thereby prove without doubt that, as both Foucault and Ivan Illich predicted, the adoption of modernist politics of victimhood or sexual identity is irreconcilable with the demands of settler/native cooperation or the restoration of tribal culture insofar as it is dependent on the rejection of tribal kinship structures as 'anachronistic' and destined to fade away.

Yet anyone who spends more than five minutes at spaces of common struggle such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra knows that discourses of solidarity or academic theories about decolonisation and gender inscription are never mentioned in the context of genuine solidarity. This is further proof that when people come together to struggle against the forces that oppress them, it is the common life together that unites them. This life, instead of forcing people to retreat into ossified identities and legal administrative categories, transforms those who join in alliance into something that they did not already know they were, revealing the possibility of common life.

[1] It Is beyond the task of this thesis to discuss the specific and practical forms of indigenous sovereignty which aim to replace or exist side by side with other administrative forms of governance (as discussed amongst others by Mansell 2016, Reynolds1996, Morton Robinson 2007.) This is a discussion best left to those who will oversee the development and application of a post-settler colonial society. My aim is rather to point philosophy in the appropriate direction to begin to confront the challenges that it must face if it wishes to assist best in bringing about the necessary political and social transformations required in light of the possibility of indigenous governance of settler societies.

The freedom of the oppressed is paramount. This goes without saying. But the liberation from the oppression of contemporary society cannot be said to fall solely on the shoulders of tribal or traditional cultures; this will only guarantee the failure of their attempts. If the native cultures of settler colonial societies have a memory and a tradition to preserve, the same cannot be said for the dominant settler classes. For the very structure of settler colonial societies demands of its members to not have a history, and to not be able to live in any other way than as occupiers. Without drawing equivalences, or seeking to create an inane hierarchy of suffering, nonetheless it is fair to say that culturally and spiritually speaking, not having 'anything to fall back on' is a situation demanding urgent redress. The apparatus that destroys the way of life that is taken forever from indigenous cultures, operates, in other ways, but in a still devastating force upon the bodies and minds of those who never had any other life to begin with. What is to be done then with the minds and lives of those for whom life has no other meaning than that which it presents to them daily in an alienated and ephemeral fashion? What is to be done for those who live in a society in which utopian energies have long been exhausted; for us lost ones who have been condemned by a deceptive liberalism to a freedom as empty as it is impossible?

Our culture has reached a point in which the suggestion that the political and cultural difficulties of the dominant majority of settler colonial cultures are historically meaningful has become almost impossible. The fragmentation of universalism combined with a certain lack of recognition of the ubiquitousness of cultural suffering has brought about a situation in which political redress is sought only through the language of compensation and equality.

The dominant narratives of contemporary liberalised feminism and environmentalism, once genuine radical social movements, have been reduced to demands for cosmetic changes that aim to preserve the status quo so long as more of us can enjoy it and the planet allows for it (it is in this sense that the environmental movement must abandon demands for sustainability, which means nothing other than the preservation of capitalism with an environmental face). The liberal discourse which personalises economic suffering demands that whilst we all 'check our privilege', the structures that maintain those privileges remain intact. Without denying the rampant inequality of standards of life and the hierarchical distribution of power in our society, one has to wonder what kind of 'privilege' it is to be powerful in a society in which power means a guarantee to continue living a life not worth living. In this sense, those who demand an equal access to the privileges afforded by capitalist societies reinforce even further the dominant values they claim to reject – a politics of *ressentiment* if there ever was one.

Perhaps for these reasons, the idea that any salvation is to come from the direction of philosophy should be received with due suspicion. After all, is not philosophy said to have been finished, once, twice, three times over? Is philosophy not part of the very complex of so-called Western Culture that violently dominates the earth at the expense of indigenous knowledges? Is it not merely a legacy of patriarchal phono-logo-centrism, as Derrida so persistently argued? But to paraphrase Alain Badiou, conflating the message of Socrates with the crimes of Imperialism would be akin to closing one's heart to the message of the Gospel due to the crimes of the Church. One should act on the contrary and reaffirm, without hesitation and without fear, one's commitment to the search for wisdom and the spread of justice.

It is this question that Giorgio Agamben seeks address through his philosophical practice. It is Agamben's achievement to have shown us that philosophy, understood as the practice developed by and inherited from Socratic culture, particularly in its Platonic presentation, may still be possible. He does so by exposing the always potential indigeneity of philosophy. It is Agamben's singular insight to show that the deprivation of those subjected to Western cultural hegemony can be redressed through a form of philosophical indigeneity that is neither a mythic retrieval of their own lost heritage, nor through the borrowing of modes of life or communion with existing or lost religious tribal or native cultures. The former tactic has proven to be at best mythological and often politically disastrous. The latter is perhaps even more insidious, as it reifies and exoticizes tribal cultures and foreign religions in the form of cheap spirituality at the same time as it deprives those cultures of their conditions of existence and only deepens the domination over those who have already lost too much.

Our reluctance to resort to our own traditions perhaps stems from the fact that the scholarly apparatus we have inherited has failed, despite the transformation of higher education since the canon wars and the development of comparative post-colonial methodologies, to adequately address this tradition with due delicacy, and hence also committed grave injustices to the other cultures they sought understand. This is not surprising given that, despite the multiplicity of contemporary academic discourses, since at least "*the end of the nineteenth century, religion in Europe had for all appearances become, at least for those who wanted to gather the history and build the science of religion, something so strange and indecipherable that they had to seek it among primitive peoples rather than in their own tradition: but the primitive peoples could only return as in a mirror the same extravagant and contradictory image that these scholars had projected onto them"* (Agamben, 2017, 312).

The predominance of spirituality (neo-paganism, psychedelics, endless monotonous festivals, tourism) over philosophy in contemporary counter culture (Tacey, 2014) is likewise based "*on a concept of the sacred that completely coincides with the concept of the obscure and the impenetrable, a theology that had lost all experience of the revealed word celebrated its union with a philosophy that had abandoned all sobriety in the face of feeling. That the religious belongs entirely to the sphere of psychological emotion, that it essentially has to do with shivers and goose bumps- this is the triviality that the neologism 'numinous' had to dress up as science*" (Agamben, 2017, 66).

This immediately raises the question of the place of philosophy in this process. Coming to terms with philosophy means to understand how we have inherited the tradition of thought handed down to us that has made us who we are. The word 'tradition' comes from the Latin 'Tradito' which means both to transmit or hand over, and to surrender. To teach and to betray. The meanings are not as opposed as they seem. Every knowledge comes with a letting go or an overcoming. As any creative artist will tell you, one has to master the fundamentals of the craft before rejecting 'tradition' and embarking on innovation or exploration. In the same way, one has to understand and learn what 'philosophy' was in order to be able to either throw it away or transmit this knowledge to others so that they can better understand their conditions of existence to resist that which oppresses them.

Agamben's work is the most incisive contemporary attempt to allow for a philosophical transformation that, through transmitting the philosophical tradition, aims to reclaim an Ontology of belonging. This form of belonging, unlike modernist state socialism or market society, does not efface difference in the face of the universality of economic justice or competition, but manages to come to terms with a life beyond property and administration, in common with indigenous tribal society.

Following the dictum that the task of philosophy is to uncover that 'which has never been written', Agamben offers his readers an experience of that which they have never known or spoken before. Instead of attempting to live and lie through the simulacra (a copy without an original) of alternative religions, philosophy, as Agamben sees it, can help recall what he paradoxically refers to as an original without an origin - the immemorial dimension of human life. Philosophy is tasked with bringing to life, whilst remaining faithful to its own tradition, a form of life that Agamben describes as simultaneously indigenous to our culture and yet, has never actually existed. Philosophy helps us to remember that which never happened, or which we never experienced.

There are many ways to be lost. It is usually assumed that to be lost is a question relating to the future. We feel we are lost when we lack a way forward, or when we think, based on knowledge at our disposal, that we have gone the wrong way, move in a circle, or, perhaps have gone too far. In either of these cases the past is still a certain stage of the journey; a sure possession awaiting the right continuation. But more awful than any confusion or disagreement about a direction forward is to be lost because one has no knowledge of arriving from anywhere; not simply the sense that we have no idea what occurred to us, but the loss of any past whatsoever is what is so terrible. To not even know that one has had a past is perhaps the greatest loss. In his attempt to recover an experience of life that, despite having ever articulated it, we all share, Agamben's work speaks to so many of us who, having nothing but our being as occupiers, experience contemporary life with a great yet inexplicable sense of loss. Agamben's wager is that through a retrieval of philosophical practices that break out of the alphabetic closure of speech enacted by Greek philosophy that we can recover an experience of life that points towards the possibility of common struggle against the destruction of the earth. It is this attempt that this thesis will evaluate and attempt to develop in the following chapters.

As we shall see, the Archaeology of Ontology will reveal that settler colonialism is premised on the administration of generic bare life that, by uniting all cultures under one abstract biological roof, forecloses any notion of an 'outside' or alternative to global administrative governance. At the same time, the colonial apparatus relies on the idea that language is only understood insofar as it is always already said to be written. This effaces the reality of oral cultures as much as it denies the literate the ability to speak without being regulated by Grammars. Language ceases to be an opening onto the world but becomes a finalised, totalised and autonomous tool of communication that provides information about what we already claim to have understood. It is this relation between language and life that Agamben seeks to uncover by finding its original nexus in Aristotle's Ontological apparatus. This apparatus paved the way for the formalisation of linguistics and the life sciences as the culmination of modern Ontology and as aids to governmental administration.

Through an exposition of Giorgio Agamben's philosophical practice this thesis will examine whether philosophy can be restored to its rightful place as the foundation for transformative politics and ethics; that is, to restore philosophy to its rightful place as the practice of transformative Ontological therapy. In terms of the preceding discussion this thesis adopts two approaches to Agamben's work:

1) To examine Agamben's work in order to utilise his analysis. It is my contention that this philosopher's project has been insufficiently understood due to a lack of appreciation of the

strong connection he draws between dominant conceptions of linguistics and our notions of 'Life' and its meaning. Both linguistics and our concept of 'Life' owe their origin ultimately to their place and delineation in Aristotle's philosophy. Without Aristotle's Ontological apparatus, arguably neither Grammar nor Biology could emerge the way they did as distinct sciences. It is the connection he draws between language and life that marks the importance of Agamben's work, over and above any philological achievements or alleged apocalyptic and messianic political exhortations. My analysis will also reveal, in distinction to dominant interpretations of Agamben's work, that the ultimate counter-cultural motivation of his work emerges from the Nietzschean invocation to overthrow Grammar for the sake of overthrowing nihilistic religion. It is for this reason that I claim Agamben is practising a form of Dionysian cultural critique aiming to rehabilitate a form of life and politics that remain impervious to and impenetrable to institutionally sanctioned ordering, governance or administration, whether emerging from the market or the state. This means that the struggle against contemporary culture must take place on the terrain of philosophy as a first line of battle.

2) To show how, despite pointing to the limit of a certain dominant conception of politics and language, Agamben's philosophical practice remains within the orbit of Greek Ontology and Western nihilism. Insofar as he confirms the task of philosophy is to reframe the relationship between being and language beyond the terms of phonetic alphabetisation, he attempts to develop a practice of Ontology and philosophy that moves beyond the historical and political dimensions of contemporary culture. Nonetheless, Agamben's aim is to develop an Ontology that lives up to what he sees as a post-historical culture that, remaining faithful to its nihilistic relationship to the world, can no longer claim any political or historical tasks for itself. My argument is that this fails to orient us in light of the immense challenges posed to settler societies faced with the claims of indigenous sovereignty and cultural assertion. Agamben's philosophy assist us in redrawing the boundaries of settler culture in order to better learn how to exit from it – therein lies the importance of studying his work in order to understand better the structures governing our societies and conceptions of humanity. Ultimately, this will only show us the door without opening it for us. I wish therefore to push Agamben's thought beyond its own limits by remaining faithful to the Nietzschean inspiration behind his work and to renew the 'conspiracy against culture' that Nietzsche attempted to inaugurate in the name of a way of life beyond nihilism. It is therefore necessary to move completely beyond the domain of Ontology as handed down by the philosophical tradition in order to make ourselves available for the only political practice that constitutes

a task for our time: the development of conditions ripe for the reassertion of indigenous sovereignty.

The Thesis contains 7 chapters, following this introduction which contextualises the terms of the debate in relation to the Decolonisation of Settler –Colonial Societies.

**Chapter 1 – Philosophy Beyond Life and Death -** It is Agamben's contention that the concept of 'Life' is a political and metaphysical notion, not a natural or biological one. This chapter develops a critical discussion of Agamben's genealogy of the notion of 'Life' in contemporary culture. For modern society, 'Life' is arguably the highest value and at the same time a generic, abstract shared substance that is said to belong to all living beings. The chapter discusses the way in which Agamben interrogates the 'sacredness' of life by tracing this notion back to Aristotle's Ontology, through modern science, leading to the politicisation of 'Life' in contemporary society. The discussion is conducted with engagement with some of the critical commentary on Agamben's philosophy.

**Chapter 2 – On the Birth of Philosophy from the Spirit of the Alphabet** - At the same time as 'Life' becomes a sacred referent for political and cultural practice and is said to be common to all 'living beings', language is conceived as the mark of distinction of specifically human 'Life'. Agamben's philosophy begins with the acknowledgment of "*the fundamental influence of alphabetic writing on our culture and on the way in which it has conceived of language" (*Agamben, 2018b, 20) Through utilising contemporary German media studies along with scholarly histories of literacy, this chapter shows how such an understanding of language is premised on the particular way that Ancient Greek culture and philosophy invented a system of notation for the capture of the human voice – the phonetic alphabet. It is only as result of the particular nature of the Greek alphabet that language comes to be seen as an autonomous, separate and fully analysable entity. This in turn enables the development of ancient Greek philosophy, and the science of Grammar that resulted from it.

**Chapter 3 – Aristotle's Ontological Apparatus -** The notions of 'Life' as a separate generic abstract substance and of 'language' as consisting of 'letters in the voice' are taken up by Aristotle who combines and politicises both these ideas into what he calls "Ontology": Onto-Logy, the science of Being insofar as it can be said. At the same time as he develops Ontology as a science, Aristotle politicises both language and life, distinguishing human 'being' from other life forms. This chapter interrogates Aristotle's Ontology and explains the way in which it lays the foundation for our practice

of politics, science and the development of Grammar as the foundational discipline of theology and the human sciences.

**Chapter 4 – The Paradoxes of Semiotics** - Insofar as language becomes an autonomous entity it has been conceived by Western philosophy and science as a 'semiotic' system: a dual and split sign system that refers to the world only insofar as it is separate from it. This chapter interrogates the science of semiotics from the perspective developed in previous chapters and addresses some of the central paradoxes and aporias that have plagued semiotics up to the so-called 'linguistic turn' of the Twentieth Century. We argue that these seemingly interminable paradoxes, central amongst which is the so-called 'paradox of self-reference', can be overcome only if philosophy and linguistics recognise their dependence on the alphabetic paradigm and fully acknowledge their complicity in the colonisation of life in modernity.

**Chapter 5 – Grammar and History** – Since its inception, the science of Grammar has been conceived of as a code to decipher the meaning of human history. For Christianity, a 'divine Grammar' was the key to understanding divine providence. Following from this, historical linguistics claimed that the mapping of Indo-European languages revealed the 'true' history of mankind. And in post-modernity, generative Grammar and cybernetics claim to universalise and naturalise Grammar as a cognitive mechanism which implies the 'end of history'. This chapter will demonstrate how the history of the philosophies of Grammar articulated in previous chapters have led linguistics and human history into a dead end of contemporary nihilism.

**Chapter 6 – The Grammar of Finitude** - Without question, the contemporary philosopher most responsible for the modern reanimation of philosophy as Ontology is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophical efforts focused on the rehabilitation of the 'question of the meaning of being' as the fundamental question of philosophy, and hence as the fundamental question underpinning all of the Western sciences. Following Heidegger, it has become impossible to treat philosophical questions as merely logical or cognitive one. This chapter shows how despite his efforts to develop an 'Ontology of finitude' true to actual human life, Heidegger remains trapped in what I have termed a 'Grammar of finitude'. He therefore remains faithful to the semiotic linguistic heritage we elaborate in the previous chapters and fails to advance beyond the legacy of metaphysics he sought to overcome.

**Chapter 7 – Conclusion - The Profanation of Philosophy and the Beginning of Decolonisation –** The concluding chapter offers a reconstruction of some central elements of Agamben's philosophical practice. It asks whether Agamben's philosophy can extricate life and language from their capture by the Ontological apparatus that was reconstructed in the previous chapters. By engaging with other dominant paradigms of philosophical therapy and practice I show that Agamben's philosophy manages to point towards the possibility of another use of language, and hence another use of life. Despite the profound importance of his philosophical archaeology of life and language in our culture, I argue that Agamben manages to take us to the furthest limits of philosophy without completely overcoming them. By developing Agamben's own practices of 'profanation' and the 'ethics of testimony' in a different way, I suggest a way to overcome the end of history and open up the possibility for settler colonisers to overcome their being as occupiers for the sake of Indigenous Sovereignty.

# Chapter 1

## Philosophy Beyond Life and Death

In a lecture delivered in Bremen in 1949 Martin Heidegger equated the extermination of European Jewry with the workings of mechanised industrial agriculture. Offering his sole public reflection on the crimes of the political movement he once belonged to, Heidegger claimed that: "Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the fabrication of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs." (Heidegger 2012, 27).

Two things immediately stand out in this provocative equation: Heidegger's omission of any direct reference to killing or murder, opting instead to use the term 'fabrication of corpses', and secondly, what follows from this choice is that, as Peter E. Gordon affirms, "this omission means that Heidegger avoids any mention of specific agency or responsibility and evokes instead the anonymous functioning of a machine"(Gordon, 2014).

It is worth meditating for a while on the deadly equation Heidegger proposes between industrial processes of agriculture and genocidal extermination. Over and above any pieties that disqualify such comparison, or the attribution of any sanctity to the genocide of the Jews over any other of the countless mass exterminations carried out by colonial and imperial powers, the philosopher is suggesting that modern society, by its very nature, is dependent on the production of human and animal waste as part of the production process. For Heidegger, the abstract and rationalized system of global industrialised society transforms all living beings into resources that are exploited for the sake of maintaining economic production. Animal waste and human corpses are a mere by-product of industrial production. Therefore, for Heidegger, any talk of the greater significance of one group of corpses over another betrays not only the sentimental prejudice of the observer but indicates a lack of understanding of the global economic system as a whole along with the nature of the political and cultural institutions that serve it.

Reflecting on of the politically planned and administratively executed ‘fabrication of corpses’ that was carried out by the Nazis, the great philosopher Hannah Arendt, Heidegger’s former student lamented that “This ought not to have happened. And I don’t just mean the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on - I don’t need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can” (Arendt 1993, 13-14).

What is it that the great thinker could not reconcile herself to? And why is it that Heidegger’s equation still causes so much discomfort? After all, the fact that modern industrial society operates as an abstract and impersonal system, causing unheard of destruction behind the back of the humans who live under it, is a common place at least since Marx and has been discussed specifically in relation to the events of the Second World War most recently by Zygmunt Bauman (2001).

Who could deny that there is a significant resemblance between the method of industrial slaughter and production of livestock and the methods utilized by the Nazis in the camps? Is it not possible to argue on the basis of the numerous industrial uses for animal products, that the consumption of dead animal flesh is only one, perhaps not even a central purpose of the meat industry? Yet the analogy with livestock breaks down here. Whilst animal corpses are slaughtered partially for the sake of the taste or nutritional value of their flesh it cannot be said that human corpses serve any culinary or dietary purpose. The West has long prohibited, and criminalised human sacrifice, and cannibalism has all but disappeared from the face of the earth.

How then to explain the specificity exemplified by the Nazi ‘fabrication of corpses’ and the inability of Arendt to reconcile herself to it? Is it the suggestion that the true meaning and horror of the camps was the denial of death; the possibility to reduce human beings to something more and worse than dead? Perhaps what is so disconcerting is the fact that the Nazis created a kind of human death that cannot be considered a sacrifice, nor for which existed an appropriate legal sanction of murder, necessitating the ‘victorious’ Allied jurists at the Nuremberg Military Tribunal to conceive of the new legal category of ‘crimes against humanity’.

As far as Heidegger’s denial agency and responsibility are concerned, it is not the task of philosophy to apportion blame or responsibility. Its task is to understand and explain so as to better learn how to assist human beings to evade their capture by forces out of their control.

It would seem that there is something more at stake in the reactions taken by two of Europe's finest thinkers of the last century – one of whom was Jewish and one of whom was, for a while at least, a member of the Nazi party. For all these reasons, Giorgio Agamben has recently developed a philosophical practice responding to the questions that perplexed Heidegger and Arendt. In the same way that Max Horkheimer once suggested 'those who refuse to talk about capitalism should not say a word about fascism', Agamben's work can be summarized by analogy as arguing that 'those who refuse to talk about life, should not say a word about death'. Moving beyond the meditation on the meaning of death that was altered forever in the camps, Agamben instead focuses on the consequences those horrors have for the way in which we understand the meaning of 'Life'.

Combining the meditations of Arendt and Heidegger with the political analysis of Benjamin, Ivan Illich and Foucault, Agamben's philosophy proposes that the 'fabrication of corpses' can appear as the end result of an industrial process only because the 'fabrication of life' is its foundation. In fact, Agamben argues, this is not just a feature of modern society but the 'standard practice' and ideology determining the meaning and function of life in Western societies that goes back to the earliest meditations on life in the Western philosophical tradition.

What emerges from his work is that in modern culture, 'Life' is both a sacred referent and a meaningless by product of an industrial and political apparatus of production. The more that we valorise and celebrate 'Life', the more and more it is clear that this very 'Life' that is said to be shared by all living beings is a disposable and generic substance akin to industrial and political waste. That the same 'Life' can be both the highest and perhaps only remaining societal value and at the same time a totally disposable waste product is a question Agamben asks us to consider.

The picture that emerges is somewhat equivalent to the one Marx drew when he developed his critique of the capitalist mode of production. One of the ways Marx attempted to expose the fetishism that is attributed to commodities was by exposing the abstract equivalence that lies behind the value attributed to commodities. How can a kilo of rice be compared to a kilo of wool, Marx asks, if we do not have some abstract measure that can allow for their comparison? Against the unscientific and unmeasurable fluctuations of 'supply and demand', Marx suggests that it is an average and abstract quantity of labour time, an abstraction from the real physical and sensual labour conducted by real human beings (or even robots or animals as it turns out) that is the basis for the measurement of value. Labour is abstracted and generalised into a measurable equivalent. This explains why for Marx, labour, conceived idealistically as the essence of human beings, can be considered both a high value and

identity for human beings in a commercial society, yet in reality be devalued to the point of being considered just another commodity amongst others and exploited so thoroughly by the capitalist economy.

By analogy, but extending the Marxist paradigm beyond its economic materialism, Agamben shows that under conditions of globalised Capitalist industry lies a common and hidden abstract equivalent that allows for the comparison between life-styles and cultures. Behind the idea of 'global humanity' lies a particular understanding of 'Life' that enables all human beings to be considered as sharing in an equal 'substance' called 'Life', this despite their differences, disparities and often irreconcilable actual political and cultural lives. With the same intensity with which today a globalised humanity that is considered to be post-historical and post-political celebrates no other value than the preservation of 'Life', and no other language to describe itself than through the abstract universal legal fiction of 'human rights' it at the same time celebrates with equal persistence difference, diversity and plurality of cultures. If for Marx, disparate and incomparable commodities could find common measure through the abstract concept of socially measurable labour time, then for Agamben, the celebration of difference and diversity is dependent on a presumed shared abstract notion of 'Life' that serves as the foundation of colonising and now globally triumphant modernity.

For these reasons Agamben can suggest even more shockingly, yet more presciently than Heidegger, that what appeared as the end result of the extermination process as a 'fabrication of corpses' is in essence the same indescribable, abstract and seemingly meaningless substance that serves as a foundation for our most cherished notions. It is not only the 'fabrication of corpses' in the camps that is shocking, but the fact that this is also the flipside of the 'fabrication of life' that is the central feature of modern society. If for Marx, changes in the pattern of consumption or the improvement of labour conditions did nothing to alter the fundamental relations of production, so for Agamben the shifts in personal life-style or personal identity do nothing to alter the fundamental politically administered concept of life upon which these identities depend. To his mind, only a thorough investigation into the emergence of such a conception can begin to shed light on the way in which today, 'Life' is captured in administrative procedures and governmental calculations such that we no longer recognize any other concept of life but as an abstract generic sense of belonging to a vaguely defined human species. What is then the 'meaning of life' today and how is it that 'Life' serves both as an abstract referent and as an ultimate value, yet resembles more than anything, a form of living death?

# No Life is Not Worth Living – the Eugenic Origins of Philosophy

Agamben's genealogical investigations, consisting of nine volumes collected together under the heading "Homo Sacer", begin with the following observation: *"The Greeks did not have a single term to express what we understand by the word life. They made use of two semantically and morphologically distinct terms: zoè, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living things (animals, human beings, or gods), and Bios, which signified the form or manner of life proper to an individual or group. In modern languages, in which this opposition gradually disappears from the lexicon (where it is preserved, as in biology and zoology, it no longer indicates a substantial difference), one sole term—whose opacity grows to an extent proportional to the sacralization of its referent—designates the bare common presupposition that it is always possible to isolate in each of the innumerable forms of life"*(Agamben, 2017, Introduction).

The separation and exclusion of bare life from political life, articulated most clearly by Aristotle, shows that "*in Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (*Agamben, Ibid.*)* This explains the conclusion that Agamben reaches in the *Homo Sacer* project that all politics is always Biopolitics, and that our culture has inherited a divided and split concept of life that it is no longer aware of.

What is more, Biopolitics is also implication of the living being in language: "*Just as, in the words of Foucault, man 'is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question', so also is he the living being whose language places his life in question. These two definitions are, in fact, inseparable and constitutively dependent on each other".* (Agamben, Ibid.)

A politics that operates by the exclusion of bare life from the *polis* at the same time rests on the definition of human beings as animals capable of 'articulate speech'. This is why the assumption of subjectivity by the living being is so essential to the functioning of social bonds and the possibility of culture: *"It is not by chance, then, that a passage of the Politics situates the proper place of the polis in the transition from voice to language. The link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as "the living being who has language" seeks in the relation between phone and logos (...) The question "In what way does the living being have language?" corresponds exactly to the question "In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?" The*

*living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized. In the "politicization" of bare life-the metaphysical task par excellence the humanity of living man is decided. In assuming this task, modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition. The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/ enemy but that of bare life in political existence, Zoe/ Bios, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (*Agamben, 2017, Introduction).

The concept of 'Life' that becomes operative in modern culture never appears as such in antiquity but: "*the principle of the sacredness of life has become so familiar to us that we seem to forget that classical Greece, to which we owe most of our ethico-political concepts, not only ignored this principle but did not even possess a term to express the complex semantic sphere that we indicate with the single term 'life.' Decisive as it is for the origin of Western politics, the opposition between Zoe and Bios . . . contains nothing to make one assign a privilege or a sacredness to life as such*." (Agamben, Ibid.).

For Agamben, the origins of our current political concepts emerge from and are determined by the history of Ontology. When, in modernity life becomes a pure sacred foundation it does so because it takes the place of 'being' as the foundation of all other types of living things. In Agamben's project, what emerges is that the way in which 'Life' is said to be articulated according to the linguistic apparatus of Ontology paves the way for its eventual sacralisation as a unitary referent. As we shall see in detail in chapter 3of this thesis, Aristotle's 'Ontological apparatus', following the structure of linguistic predication, separates Being from its referents as an unspoken presupposition. When Aristotle, identifying Being and Language claims that 'being is said in many ways' he at the same times shows how 'Life' is divided in many ways according to the ways in which being is said. Applying the Ontological apparatus onto living creatures allows Aristotle to begin to divide 'Life' into various forms, without defining clearly either of them as a referent, but allowing for the notion of 'nutritive life' to become a common foundation of living things. The status of 'pure being' in Aristotle's Ontology is structurally identical to the status of 'vegetative life' as a generic foundation for the many ways in which life 'can be articulated' (Agamben, 2017).

Aristotle could only mobilise language in such a way because he had the Ancient Greek alphabet at his disposal. In distinction to prior uses of the alphabet predecessors, the ancient Greeks claimed to regulate all human speech into indivisible elements represented by letters. As we shall see in following chapters, Ontology becomes possible as a science only once Aristotle can claim that the Alphabet regulates human speech through the articulation of letters and allows for a distinction between human and animal language. For Aristotle, it is the total capture of speech in the form of writable elements that distinguishes human beings from other living beings insofar as it enables them to become political. The Ontological apparatus that separates being from its referent and life from its form, functions through the power of alphabetic letters to regulate human speech to the point where it is 'politicised' as a defining essence of the species. Any critique of 'Life' therefore must begin with a critique of Ontology and an interrogation of the function of alphabetisation in the construction of Western science and culture.

## Dionysus in the Polis

Despite a frequent and myopic claim made by some scholars (Dubruiel 2006, Finalyson (2010)) Agamben never attributes the *Zoe/Bios* distinction to any particular author. He only mentions that his research picks up where Foucault and Arendt's investigations stop and that he is developing their insights on the general biopolitical question. It is far more likely that Agamben read directly about the distinction and comparison of the terms in Karl Kerenyi's study of the Dionysian mystery cults (1976). Agamben mentions the works Kerenyi co-authored with Jung which he draws on to reconstruct the myth of the "Kore" (Agamben, 2014b) and in Homo Sacer Vol 1(Agamben 2017) he cites, Kerenyi's *La Religione Antica nelle sue line fondamentali* which mentions the distinction (sections of Kerenyi's book were translated into English under the title "Ancient Religion" (Kerenyi,1961).

Evidence would suggest that Agamben relies directly on Kerenyi (and Ivan Illich) for his deployment of the *Bios*/*Zoe* distinction and therefore this is an additional reason to place Agamben's work in the tradition of a Nietzschean inspired Dionysian critique of culture. In addition, as I discuss below, the importance of the multiplicity of Greek terms for life in terms of understanding contemporary

biopolitics was already raised by Ivan Illich, an author Agamben knew personally and wrote about with great admiration, and whose work is in urgent need of reconsideration.

Kristof' Fenyvesi (2014) has shown in great detail how Kerenyi mobilised the concepts of *Bios* and *Zoe* authoritatively across his corpus decades before Agamben. Fenyvesi stops short of attributing Agamben's point directly to Kerenyi but provides an illuminating comparative reading. What is important for us is that in his study of Dionysus, Kerenyi draws inspiration directly from both Nietzsche and Walter Otto and reframes Nietzsche's infamous Dionysian/Apollonian distinction precisely in terms of a distinction between *Zoe,* which he terms infinite life and *Bios* which he calls limited life: "The distinction between infinite life and limited life is made in the Greek language by the two different words *Zoe* and *Bios*. Such a distinction was possible in Greece without the intervention of philosophy or even of reflection because language is the direct expression of experience" (Kerenyi, 1976, 28). In the Introduction he explains that: "In their everyday language the Greeks possessed two different words that have the same root as *vita* but present very different phonetic forms: *Bios* and *Zoe*." (Kerenyi, 1976, 31).

Kerenyi argues that *Zoe* serves as a generic life that belongs to all living species and defines it as, "life in general without characterisation" which pertains to Zoology, which is to be distinguished from *Bios* which is defined as "characterised life" and pertains to biography. (Kerenyi, 1976. In antiquity *Bios* was attributed to animals only to distinguish them from plants, when referring the particular qualities of this or that animal. Kerenyi therefore argues accordingly that the "life" with which modern biology concerns itself cannot be related to *Bios*: "The word *biologos* meant to the Greeks a mime who imitated the characteristic life of an individual…from the Greek point of view modern biology should be called 'zoology'" (Kerenyi, 1976, Introduction). In modern science the terms seem to be reversed or interchangeable as Zoology pertains to the study of animals specifically whereas Biology is the study of the phenomenon of "life" in general.

On the other hand, *Zoe*, is "considered without further characterisations and experienced without limitations…*Zoe* is the minimum of life with which biology first begins" (Kerenyi, 1976, 34). Kerenyi points out that in distinction to *Bios* which could be written about and claimed as genuine experience, *Zoe* was indescribable, it is simply our "most intimate and self-evident experience" (Kerenyi, 1976, 36) which we carry with us and which flashes up when we awaken from fainting spells or sleep, or through shame – it is that which is remains assumed and immemorable in every memory.

Kerenyi explains how *Zoe,* insofar as it is a minimal quantum of life cannot even be said to relate to death or to experience death. Death is always understood for the Greeks as qualified, as a type of death belonging to a particular life – it always has meaning. *Zoe* on the other hand can never die, it is equated with eternal and infinite life – the part of the *Bios* that moves from one life to another in reincarnation of transmigration. This points further to the temporal element of the *Zoe* which was defined by the Greek Hesychios as *chronos tou einai*- "time of being" – a continuous presence within every living being. Kerneyi, in a poetic vein, states that "*Zoe* is the thread upon which every individual *Bios* is strung like a bead, and which in contrast to *Bios* can be conceived of only as endless" (Kerenyi, 1976, 34). This is why Christians, when referring to the eternal life of God used the term "aionios *Zoe*" – eternal life. The generic minimal qanta of life pertaining to all beings is that which guarantees the duration and perpetuation of the divinity.

Kerenyi shows that the Dionysian cult centred around the religion and worship of *Zoe*, the cult was the expression and veneration of the ecstatic, festive, non-representable elements of nature, human and divine. From a general, culture-theoretical perspective, since Birth of Tragedy by Nietzsche, Dionysus has personified ecstasy understood as the excess of life. The Dionysian epitomises transgressive states, crossed boundaries, the loss of "I", and a complete immersion into an event or a ritual. It means total participation and a loss of distance.

Dionysus is ever present in Agamben's project. The entire method of philosophical archaeology, which Agamben describes as his attempt to '*read what was never written*', is dedicated to the retrieval of the life that cannot be remembered or represented. This is precisely the kind of experience Nietzsche and Kerenyi described and celebrated. The life that emerges when we awake from sleep, or from fainting, in ecstasy, or the life that we carry around with us in every waking moment as the most intimate of experiences that whilst not being articulated through grammatical speech is the vocal foundation and condition of possibility for it.

What emerges from Agamben's work is that the way in which '*Zoe*' is politicised by Aristotle entails that it is transformed from a Dionysian element into a foundation for a political order. The politicisation of natural life transforms it into a 'bare-life'. This transforms the most crucial Dionysian experience, denying it from being understood as an integral part of humanity in its relation to nature and the world at large by making it into a 'killable' element. Human beings as living creatures can experience their own life as natural beings beyond any articulation or representation. If language is said to be the medium through which the world is revealed 'politically' this is not because language

is transcribable through letters but because there is language prior to any attempt to represent or transcribe it.

From this perspective, Agamben's project is the continuation of Nietzschean cultural critique, directed at the history of Ontology. This is because Ontology is the discipline which has orchestrated the way in which language relates to the world in Western philosophy. The entire tradition dependent on Ontological apparatus constructed by Aristotle assumes that human beings are 'political' animals insofar as they are in possession of articulate speech. This means that for Western politics, what falls outside the terms of grammaticised discourse is the same as that which is considered outside the bounds of political representation and becomes a silent referent.

The specifically Dionysian critique of Ontology Agamben deploys is based on a resumption of Nietzsche's project. In light with the Dionysian sources illuminating his work, many of the elements of Giorgio Agamben's conception of philosophical practice were prefigured in Nietzsche's infamous, yet not always understood, attack on the relation between Grammar and theology. In the Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche correlated Grammar and theology and proclaimed, "I am afraid we are not rid of god because we still have faith in Grammar". (Nietzsche 2005, S5). It is from that vantage point that Agamben's project should be understood as an attempt to amend the crucial error that Nietzsche made in his analysis and practice. Nietzsche' exposed and attacked the naïve belief in the objectivity of linguistic terms and referents, along with the equally naïve belief that religious practice made sense independently from the categories of Grammar. Most importantly, the very notion of Ontology – that being can be captured in language – is from his perspective, a cultural and historical institution intimately tied to a linguistic apparatus (in this case Indo-European Grammar) , that at worst was a malicious and deliberate attack on humanity, and at best, an error caused by naivete (lack of proper reflection on the nature of language) which nonetheless resulted in disastrous consequences from which we have not yet begun to emerge.

It is often thought that Nietzsche's challenge to liberate language from Grammar so as to liberate humanity from God, was one which he ultimately, and sadly, failed to complete due to the personal circumstances that led to his collapse in 1889 followed by his descent into insanity and ultimately his untimely death eleven years later. It seems indecent to argue against a philosopher by pointing to personal circumstances, no matter how tragic. Woodford Nietzsche's failure, no matter how rich and fruitful it was for the culture that adopted his philosophical ethos, stemmed not so much from his personal incapacities but from an error in the form in which he answered his own question – in the

attempt to oppose to language and Ontology a notion of 'Life' and living that were interpreted all too physiologically as Darwinian a-moral phenomena.

Peter Woodford (2018) elaborates this point when he explains how Nietzsche's re-evaluation of values was undertaken from the standpoint of a physiologically understood concept of 'Life', more or less according to the dominant concepts governing biological and medical discourse in the 19th century (some dominant still today). This trapped him in an evolutionary understanding of nature and history which resulted in unpalatable suggestions for social reorganisation. For all his philological acumen and genealogical examinations Nietzsche's vitalism got the better of him and his project collapsed due to the fact that he insisted on basing his 're-evaluation of values' – his 'conspiracy against culture'- on a toxic notion of 'Life' that he opposed to Christianity and Platonism, that was insufficiently examined, and hence remained too closely tied to the tradition he believed he was critiquing. What Nietzsche did not, or would not, realise was that, far from being a medical-scientific notion, life in Western philosophy and science is a "political-philosophical concept" whose origin is metaphysical. It is this transformation of our understanding of life, and its alleged meaning and use as a foundation for scientific and philosophical discourse, that Giorgio Agamben undertakes in his philosophical archaeology. It is the consequences of this renewed attempt to answer Nietzsche's challenge that we seek to examine in the following sections and chapters**.**

## Generic Life

Ivan Illich's influence on Agamben's understanding of the concept of 'Life' is unquestionable. This is evident in the way Agamben mobilises Ivan Illich's thought in one of his clearest discussions of 'Life' in contemporary science and culture. Agamben claims that our *"conventional notion of life (not 'a life' but 'Life' in general) is perceived as a 'scientific fact', which has no relationship with the experience of the singular living person. It is something anonymous and generic, which can designate at times a spermatozoon, a person, a bee, a cell, a bear, an embryo. It is this 'scientific fact', so generic that science has given up on defining it, that the church has made the ultimate receptacle of the sacred and bioethics the key term of its impotent foolishness. In any case 'Life' today has more to do with survival that with the vitality or form of life of the individua*l" (Agamben, 2017, 1025)

Agamben would have read an iteration of the ideas he evokes in a printed version of an address given by Ivan Illich in 1989 predating the composition of Homo Sacer by several years (the Italian edition

of '*Use of Bodies -Homo Sacer 4.2'* cites the Italian translation of 2005 but Agamben would also have known the English or French versions). In the text, Illich points out that: "in ancient Greek there was no single term for life but rather two distinct terms: The concept of life does not exist in Greco-Roman antiquity: *Bios* means the course of a destiny and *Zoe* something close to the brilliance of aliveness" (Illich 1991, 227).

Speaking to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chicago he boldly and decisively shows how: "Human life' is a recent social construct, something we now take so much for granted that we dare not seriously question it. I propose that the Church exorcise references to the new substantive life from its own discourse" (Illich, 1991, 219). Following his dramatic exhortation to the church, Illich continues to demonstrate, in a research project that is independent from Foucault's, that "Life constitutes an essential referent in current ecological, medical, legal, political and ethical discourse. Consistently, those who use it forget that the notion has a history; it is a Western notion, ultimately the result of a perversion of the Christian message. And it is also a highly contemporary notion, with the confusing connotations that obliterate the power of the word to denote anything precise. Thinking in terms of 'a life' and 'human life' vaguely connotes something of extreme importance and tends to abolish all limits that decency and common sense have so far imposed on the exercise of professional tutelage. As currently used, the English words 'Life' and 'a life' feed the most powerful idol which the Church has had to face in the course of her history". (Illich, Ibid.).

Of course, it is not only the church but our entire culture. Lacking any other foundation, modern society has enshrined the notion of "life' as a sacred referent in political, cultural, medical, social and ecological discourses.5 years later, in 1994 Ivan Illich expressed his fear that "the abstract, secular notion of "a life" will be sacralised, thereby making it possible that this spectral entity will progressively replace the notion of a "person" in which the humanism of Western individualism is anchored" (Illich 1994, 4). Fearing the worst, Illich attempted to construct a short genealogy of the concept of 'Life' in order to remind his readers that, like every concept and referent in our culture, it has a history : "The notion of a human life as a distinct entity which can be professionally and legally protected has been torturously constructed through a legal-medical-religious-scientific discourse whose roots go far back into theology" (Illich,1991.,5). Despite the very different meaning it had for an early Christian who sought to follow Jesus and say "I am Life", and the meaning it does in the case of a medically prolonged or terminated life, Illich shows that the referent has a shared origin : "life as a property, as a value, a national resource, a right, is a Western notion which shares its Christian ancestry with other key verities defining secular society" (Illich, Ibid.).

‘Life’ did not exist as a unified concept until modern science articulated it as a foundation for its disciplines. Illich points out that in accordance with the various ways in which life was understood the question ‘what is life?’, with the subject taken as a substantive, was never asked until the advent of modern biology which simultaneously obscures the referent it takes as a substantive: “What is life? is not a perennial question, but the pop-science counterfoil to scientific research reports on a mixed bag of phenomena such as reproduction, physiology, heredity, organization, evolution and, more recently, feedback and morphogenesis” (Illich, 1991.,6).

In Illich’s narrative it is only beginning with Jean Baptiste Lamarck, a French scientist of the Napoleonic war era, that ‘Life’ begins to emerge as a substantive scientific term. Lamarck sought to overcome the conflicting scientific paradigms of mechanism, vitalism and materialism which relied on descriptive analysis of living beings according to their division into three kingdoms – animal, mineral, vegetable, all of which are generated in different incompatible ways. Lamarck, instead divides living beings into two rather than three categories : Organic and Inorganic which differ not on the basis of visible structure but as a result of ‘organising principle’ – it is this structural organising principle that Lamarck, and the biologists following him, term ‘Life’ : “Then, as morphological, physiological and genetic studies became more precise toward the middle of the 19th centur, life and its evolution become the hazy and unintended by-products reflecting in ordinary discourse an increasingly abstract and formal kind of scientific terminology.” (Illich, Ibid.).

For modernity, ‘Life’ comes to mean not a particular way of being but a substantive and abstract foundation upon which all living beings structurally depend. It is only because of this scientific principle that we begin , in modernity, to talk about ‘Life’ as the subject of property (the difference between having a ‘Life’ and being alive), or as something engineerable and manipulable, or something that serves as a foundation for the unity of beings within an ecology (the reliance of contemporary environmentalism on a cybernetically defined scientific notion of ‘Life’ as a self-regulating system is a serious limitation of the movement which perhaps explains its fetish of ‘sustainability’ as an economic model).

Illich described contemporary society as being completely enslaved to this notion to the point where there is no longer any other or higher value than life: “Society is now organized on the utilitarian assumption that man is born needy, and needed values are by definition scarce. It becomes axiomatic that the possession of life is then interpreted as the supreme value. *Homo economicus* becomes the

referent for ethical reflection. Living is equated with a struggle for survival or, more radically, with a competition for life. For over a century now it has become customary to speak about the "conservation of life" as the ultimate motive of human action and social organization." (Illich, 1991,7).

The transformations in our notions of health, living and dying, and the very understanding of what it means to be a person have been profound as a consequence of the invention of the 'Life sciences', culminating in evolutionary biology. Yet, at the same time as 'Life' becomes the highest value, its definition becomes murkier and looser. The boundaries that define the distinction between life and death keep shifting according to the needs of ethical and medical technologies – an illuminating example is the debate about the definition of 'brain death' following the refinement of life support technologies. Having gained the ability to maintain the life of a person beyond the cessation of vital functions the boundaries of what constitutes 'Life' or 'death' are technologically determined and become blurred (see the discussion in Agamben 2017, 127-131). No definition can be agreed upon to the point that Peter Medawar, the renowned immunologist responsible for the discoveries leading to organ transplant, claimed that "in biology, discussions on the meaning of words 'life and 'death' are signs of a low-level conversation'. (Medawar, 1983, in Agamben, 2000, 7).

Illich's diagnosis was developed alongside and in contact with Michel Foucault's research (1970), which demonstrated that in modernity 'Life' becomes an autonomous category and value. This despite the fact that "before modernity, life did not exist, just as a science of life itself, biology, did not exist. Only with the rise of modernity do a knowledge about life and a power over life appear simultaneously, a biology and a biopolitics whose lethal connections we had better analyse and understand" (Tarizzo 2017, Introduction).

Along with Language and Labour, Life, since the early 19$^{th}$ century, serves as one of the three foundations for the modern understanding of human beings as 'autonomous' and self-regulating creatures who, having allegedly discarded the theological and earthly powers that had once limited them, use those three scientific substantive concepts to orient themselves. Human power and action are now possible as a result of having acquired knowledge over 'Life' as an existentiality definitive and determining principle. For this reason, Foucault argues that modern power is also bio-power – that the political task of regulating, improving, enhancing, cataloguing and measuring human beings has become possible and available as a political and ethical ambition as a result of the substantive notion of 'Life' as the ultimate political and social referent.

Foucault attributed the discovery of 'Life' to Cuvier more so than the work of Lamarck. It was in Cuvier's pre-evolutionary synthetic notion of life that Foucault saw the first glimmer of an autonomous conception of living beings: "evolutionism is a biological theory, of which the condition of possibility was a biology without evolution—that of Cuvier" (Foucault 1970, 300). Whether we begin with Cuvier, or even Bichat, who separates "Life" into two substances or Lamarck, all of whom conducted their researches in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, the notion of life that emerges is that of a unified and separate 'substance' or 'principle' (See Foucault, 1970).

Davide Tarizzo (2017) has summarised the essential features of this concept of life, which beginning with post-revolutionary French scientists passes into Darwinism and into the cybernetic and genetic sciences of today. The modern notion of 'Life' functions as a substantive referent in the following 3 ways:

1)*A synthetic unity* – a generic unity of different forms of life now understood as a single principle.

*2)A secret force* – a pulsating and hidden silent motivation of all creatures which due to its depth and power can be infinitely shaped and transformed but cannot 'speak' for itself.

*3) An obscure will of the self* - 'Life' becomes the ethical and cultural power that shapes individuals – a 'savage Ontology' that defines the existential theatre in which humans operate as biomedical and self-regulating that despite its genericity and ubiquitousness somehow also functions as an individually unique possession.

'Life' is the consequence of a philosophical operation and not a pre-existing actual entity. Following Illich and Foucault, Agamben recognises the ubiquity of the 'referent' life in our culture. However, he broadens the scope of analysis and locates the origin of the process by which life becomes a substance in the formulation of Aristotle's Ontology rather than the history of the church or only beginning with a shift in 'episteme of knowledge' in modernity.

Aristotle inaugurates the appearance of *'Zoe'* on the political stage as a qualified human uniqueness. For Aristotle, 'Life' has a technical and strategic meaning and function, despite not being precisely defined In his *Politics* he defines politics as the sphere of life in which human beings who are 'born in view of living *(tou zen*) 'come together with the 'view of living well' (*tou en zen*) (Aristotle,1984

– Politics1252b) But when he seeks to define what this 'Life' is he does so only by articulating and dividing it. Agamben's analysis shows how in the same way in which Aristotle's Ontology begins from the assertion in *The Categories* that Being is 'said in many way ways', in his *De Anima* he articulates *'Zoe'* in various ways according to the same strategy that the operational term falls to the bottom as a presupposition or foundation enabling all its other definitions to function(Agamben, 2017, 1203-1205.)

To ask 'what is life'? is to ask how one part of life falls to the bottom as a foundation for other things that define it or participate in it. Aristotle isolates and separates within the various definitions or modes of life a generic one which he calls *'threptike psyche'* that he associates with 'nutritive life' as a part of the soul. It is that which he claims is shared by all living beings regardless of their form and hence Aristotle says: 'we call nutritive potential that part of the soul in which even plants participate" (Aristotle, 1984-De Anima, 413a). According to Aristotle the nutritive faculty or element of the soul is therefore 'the most primary and common potential of the soul, through which all things have life' (Aristotle, 1984-De Anima,415a).

Yet, in order for mere life to become a political life 'lived well' it is necessary for the part of life that is thought to be separated from politics to be politicised. Agamben's efforts show that at the same time as 'nutritive life' (which as a result of the translation by Latin commentators is what we refer to now as 'vegetative life') is labelled the common generic life it is politicised as the foundation of the city (Agamben, 2017). Nutritive life is precisely the element of the soul which for the decidedly un-Dionysian Aristotle does not participate in reason or contribute to happiness in any way and insofar as for human beings it is excluded from virtue it must be politicised and brought into line with the confines of the political sphere.. This is precisely why Agamben argues that *"what we can now call the Ontological-biopolitical machine of the West is founded on a division of life that, by means of a series of caesurae and thresholds - Zoe/Bios, insufficient life/autarchic life/, family/city) takes on a political character that was initially lacking. But it is precisely by means of this articulation of its 'Zoe' that the human being, uniquely among the living, becomes capable of political life. The function of proper to the machine, that is to say, is an operation on the living that by 'politicising' its life, renders it 'self-sufficient', namely capable of taking part in the polis*." (Agamben, 2017,1210).

This why Agamben can claim that De Anima "*is probably the first text in which 'Life'(Zoe) takes on a generic sense, distinct from the life of the single individual, from 'a life"* (Agamben, 2017, 1209) and immediately go on to comment, mentioning Illich, that it was this procedure that allowed the

Church to fetishize life as a sacred referent. If we understand how this strategy is initially carried out and taken up by subsequent definitions of both life and politics then we can see why, for Agamben, "*what we call politics is above all a special qualification of life, carried out by means of a series of partitions that pass through the very body of Zoe. But this qualification has no content other than the pure fact of the caesura as such. This means that the concept of life will not truly be thought as long as the biopolitical machine, which has always already captured it within itself by means of a series of divisions and articulations, has not been deactivated. Until then, bare life will weigh on Western politics like an obscure and impenetrable sacral residue*" (Agamben, Ibid.).

## Sacred Ontology

The immense power of 'Life' as a unified cultural referent and principle prompted Walter Benjamin to question the connection between modern law and the notion of 'sanctity of life'. Benjamin thought that: "It might be well worthwhile to track down the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life. Perhaps, indeed probably, it is relatively recent, the last mistaken attempt of the weakened Western tradition to seek the saint it has lost in cosmological impenetrability" (Benjamin 2004, 251). What is it, Benjamin asks, that makes the life of a human being such that its killing is considered a violation of 'sanctity'? Benjamin tries to show that this sanctity is a modern notion insofar as it is to be distinguished from a simple religious or ethical prohibition like the commandment "Thou Shall Not Kill". According to Benjamin's analysis, modernity severs itself from ancient religious cosmological injunction and following the reification of 'Life' as a political and medical referent comes to replace the ancient notion of 'guilty life' with 'sacredness'. The religious sanction against murder refers to an injunction pertaining to the doer of the deed, it is an injunction to prevent murderous action. The dogma of the sacredness of life however is attributed to the being that is killed. It is an adjectival (sanctity) attribution on the basis of a substantive "life" which, Benjamin implies, indicates a sacralisation of something that is assumed to exist as a synthetic unity and referent (Benjamin, 2004). In order for life to be sacred there must already be assumed to be something that exists which we call 'Life'.

For Benjamin, the association of the value of a human being with anything referred to as life itself or bare life seemed highly suspect. Benjamin wonders why and how the source of value or meaning

in a person's life or of that person as whole is said to pertain to their bare existence as a biological or natural substance, free of all other cultural determinations; A sort of degree zero of 'aliveness'? He argues that: "Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, no more than with any other of his conditions and qualities, not even with the uniqueness of his bodily person. However sacred man is (or that life in him that is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife), there is no sacredness in his condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men. What, then, distinguishes it essentially from the life of animals and plants? And even if these were sacred, they could not be so by virtue only of being alive, of being in life" (Benjamin, 2004, 251).

It is this line of questioning that Agamben seeks to respond to when he attempts to uncover the history and consequence of the dogma of the sanctity of life in modern culture. As we saw above against the Foucauldian idea that 'Life' is an invention made possible due to a modern scientific paradigm, Agamben finds the origin of this doctrine in one of the oldest and most dominant modes of thinking in Western Culture: Ontology. Of course, prior to the advent of modern resuscitation and life-prolongation techniques a 'nutritive' or 'bare' life was not physically separable from the human being and Aristotle did not have at his disposable any experience or example of an isolated nutritive faculty. This is why the division of life he carries out is derivative of the structural logical/ideological demands of Ontology as he formulates it. Life is divided in this way because the discourse on 'being' that Aristotle develops as 'first philosophy' demands that logic apply itself through a divisive presuppositional structure. Politics and life itself, if they want to measure up to the standards of 'first philosophy' and proper examination, must conform to its logic. As Agamben puts it, "*Logos can divide what cannot be physically, and the consequence that this 'logical' division exercises on life is that of rendering possible its politicisation*" (Agamben, 2017,1211).

## Killing Without Sacrifice or Murder

The dogma of the sacredness of human life, the ability to render a human being 'sacer', is ultimately dependent on the way in which 'Life' is separated out as a generic 'nutritive' and non-political element, initially developed by Aristotle and thus handed over to our tradition in the form of a metaphysical abstraction. Agamben's purpose then is to explain how the modern dogma of the sacredness of life

originates from a political and ultimately Ontological source, not a religious one. The Homo Sacer project is an attempt at a significant intervention in religious and anthropological history, not simply a philosophical examination of Aristotle. Significant portions of the various parts of Homo Sacer (Agamben, 2017) are devoted to a detailed historical examination of Greek, Roman and Modern law and politics seeking to uncover the meaning of the legal figure of '*Homo Sacer'* which is defined as a life that can be killed with impunity. This impunity is granted because the killing takes place outside both legal rituals related to capital punishment following criminal conviction in a trial and in exclusion form sacrificial or purification rituals related to consecration to the divine or other religious ceremony.

It is sufficient for our purposes to show that the status of the figure of 'Homo Sacer' is generated historically, not structurally. In its specific legal meaning *Homo sacer* emerges from ancinet Roman law. (Agamben, 2017) Alexander Reid-Ross has noted the colonial context of its modern use in the United States Supreme Court ruling of 1873 *Modoc Indian Prisoners* which "formally allowed white settlers to kill those described as "Indians" without being charged of murder." (Reid-Ross, 2017).
It is only on this historical basis that a structural analogy is made with the Ontological Apparatus that Aristotle generates. Structurally speaking, the 'Homo Sacer' is the political and legal manifestation of a 'bare' or generic life that according to the presuppositional apparatus is at once isolated and separated from yet serves as a foundation for the legal order (Agamben, 2017, 15-29, 71-74). Despite being excluded it is not 'liberated' or free from the law but subjected to its full power without recourse to any justice, something that even inmates on death row have at their disposal seeking to overturn a conviction or sentence. For the Homo Sacer, there is no recourse to the law other than being available to be killed by any member of the community.

In line with its Nietzscheian and Benjaminian motivations, the central focus of Homo Sacer Vol 1 is, by making a distinction between sacrality and sacrifice, an attempt to retrieve a notion of 'sacer' against the anthropological thesis of the 'ambiguitiy of the sacred' (Agamben, 2017,75-80) Agamben's investigation leads to his wholesale rejection of founding myths of modern anthropology and religious studies. His critique leads to the original thesis that "*in modernity, the principle of the sacredness of life is thus completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term 'sacred' continues the semantic history of homo sacer and not that of sacrifice"*, (Agamben, 2017, 95). This is a major philological undertaking with crucial sociological insights that is rarely mentioned by critics. I am only of aware of one scholar who appreciates this. Robbie Duschinsky (2012,2014) commented that: "Most scholars of Agamben neglect the issue of the meaning or

meanings of the sacred entirely, focussing instead on issues of sovereignty. This ignores Agamben's repeated indications that one cannot be understood without the other" (Duschinsky, 2012, 144).

Agamben argues that the meaning of 'sacred' has been over-determined by the anthropological trope of the 'ambiguity of the sacred'. Scholars from Frazer to Durkheim claimed that sanctity resided in the mysterious power of religious objects themselves, which remained 'ambiguous' insofar as they at one attracted and repelled those who come in contact with them. In fact, this notion originates from Robertson-Smith's mistaken displacement of the ancient Hebrew notion of the 'ban' (*herem*) onto the idea of the 'taboo' of religious phenomena observed by the early anthropological researches that emerged during European imperial conquest (Agamben,2017, 64-70). Duschinsky concurs and explains that "According to Robertson Smith, *taboo* is a 'system of restrictions on man's arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by the dread of supernatural penalties.' He interprets it as ambiguous, itself holy but capable of rendering things or people impure. Robertson Smith sees its operation as equivalent to the Hebrew word *herem*, which he defines as the state of 'ban' to which 'impious sinners, or enemies of the community and its god', were subjected, in which they and their property were 'not sacrificed, but simply slain'" (Duschinski, 2014,251.) This confusion was adopted by Marrett and Fowler and taken up by Mauss until being finally canonised by Durkheim**.** Agamben points out that "*The analysis of the ban— which is assimilated to the taboo—determines from the very beginning the genesis of the doctrine of the ambiguity of the sacred: the ambiguity of the ban, which excludes in including, implies the ambiguity of the sacred*" (Agamben, 2017, 65).

Separated from the anthropological tropes of the 'ambivalence of the sacred' and a theory of sacrifice, the meaning of 'sacer' must be found elsewhere. For this reason, Agamben attempts to answer Benjamin's question by tracing the dogma of the sacredness of life all the way back to the construction of Ontology**.**

## Impure Philology

A very persistent scholarly approach interprets Agamben's arguments in purely philological terms as if his project depended on the claim that insofar as 'bare life' is the threshold between politics and the household in Aristotle, or that Agamben is identifying Aristotle with an entity called 'Western politics' as a unified historical entity. Therefore, some scholars assume that if the philological accuracy of

Agamben's claim can be challenged, his entire project fails, and we can safely return to our support of 'Western culture' (Dubruiel 2006, Finalyson 2010) Given the complete inaccuracy of this interpretation, which is clear from the most cursory reading of Agamben's work, this stance betrays its impure motivations.

Criticism of Agamben's work is primarily focused on sections of Volume 1 in a 9-volume series. Firstly, the opening volume of Homo Sacer is a partial examination of a theme of research developed over15 years in 9 volumes, and developed in subsequent publications (Agamben, 2018a). To dismiss the claims of an author on the basis of a selective and deliberately misleading fragments of his work and to dismiss him as posturing yet to claim that one's research is more authoritative precisely as a result of superior erudition of ancient Greek is remarkable. As I demonstrated above, even in terms of the first volume of *Homo Sacer,* the delineation of the Homo Sacer as a paradigmatic figure is based not on a structural perspective but on the basis of a recovery of anthropological, classical and sociological scholarship. The structure of the exception that Agamben delineates is not an abstraction but a theoretical model guiding and organising the historical material that Agamben deals with. The plausibility of the project does not only rely on the correct origin of the *Bios*/ *Zoe* distinction, which in any case is mobilised in order to critique Ontology but perhaps more so on the plausibility of the historical evidence.

Laurent Dubruiel rightly notes that in regard to the *Zoe*/*Bios* distinction "Something other than a terminology or lexicography is in play" (Dubruiel 2006, 83). This comment indicates a worldview and is not simply a terminological or philological point. Despite this he mobilises a critique which on the surface remains philological and is worth interrogating insofar as it is paradigmatic of the way Agamben's research has been received.

Dubruiel claims Agamben popularised terms indicated by Arendt and developed by Foucault. In Arendt's *The Human Condition* we read in effect that *Bios* is situated "in opposition to the simple *Zoe*", and proves thus to be "specifically human life" (Arendt, in Dubrueil, 2006, 84). Of course, Arendt herself borrowed this from Kerenyi, whom she cites in that text (Arendt, 1958, 63).

Dubrueil refers us back to the explanations of ancient Grammarians and commentators:
"The interplay between *Zoe* and *Bios* was remarked upon much earlier by Greek speakers. The Grammarians proposed two notable theories to explain the competition in terms. For some, the distinction would be related to duration and continuity. *Bios* would be "the time of *Zoe*" a portion of

it. Some other authors proposed the inverse repartition. The second explanation lies at the origin of Arendt's words, as of Agamben's and their followers'. For Ammon of Alexandria, "*Bios* is appropriate to animals of reason [*logikon zoon*], that is, to human beings only; *Zoe* to human beings and animals without reason." We must note as well that the philologist uses Aristotle's distinctions without wondering whether the reasonable use preferred by the Stagirite is relevant for the entire Greek language. Let us add that other Grammarians believed a contrario that *Bios* had been the term reserved for nonrational animals. Obviously, each of the two constructions relies on more or less convincing examples" (Dubruiel, 2006, 85). Dubruiel's critique is premised on the work of late Hellenistic Grammarians who wrote commentaries on Aristotle. He therefore assumes that a grammatical philological critique suffices to undermine Agamben's observation, without mentioning Kerenyi and ignoring the fact that a purely philological perspective neglects the broader context within which words are used. This was precisely the point Nietzsche made when defending his own critical philology (Nietzsche, 1966).

Dubruiel's second point is based on the fact that Aristotle himself uses the terms interchangeably in other contexts. The author therefore recognises that the issue may simply be one of degree: "In fact, one could follow Agamben (more than one can Arendt) on the degree of qualification. Aristotle has perhaps the tendency to place *Bios* more on the side of particular life (vegetable or aquatic) than on the general. One would have the play between a marked substantive and an unmarked one, linguistically speaking. But in no case can *Bios* be reserved to either humans or political practice. Finally, Aristotle is not the entire Greek corpus." (Dubruiel, Ibid.).

The author makes out a third critical point that the distinction was used by other authors (he cites Euripides and Plato) and is therefore indeed part of am established semantic tradition, but he thinks that whilst Agamben is right to intervene in this tradition by offering a critical reinterpretation of words, he is wrong to assume it applies in general to Greek language as a whole.

The main critique is therefore that "Agamben simplifies Aristotle's texts, and then dissolves them into the grandiose entity of "the Greeks." Embedded in the unfounded argument from authority is a network of unspoken motives, which we must expose, then denounce." (Dubruiel, 2006, 86). Apparently Agamben's motive is the uptake of a Heideggerian philosophical history. This confuses the use of Heidegger's work as a descriptive model for the history of Ontology with the endorsement of Heidegger's reification of that model. Dubruiel therefore accuses Agamben of mobilising 'erudition as authority' instead of 'proper' scientific and scholarly procedure. In this way Dubruiel's

rebuttal of the critique of language comes at the price of the defence of the institutions set to 'protect' it. Secondly, Agamben apparently is displaying a kind of fetishizing of an alleged 'origin' in Greek culture which has been perverted or disrupted. All this despite Agamben's own admission in the text that it is not possible to return to classical categories of politics and his constant polemical points that the categories of politics must be completely renewed. Agamben explicitly states: *"This is why the restoration of classical political categories proposed by Leo Strauss and, in a different sense, by Hannah Arendt can only have a critical stance. There is not return from the Camps to classical politics*" (Agamben, 2017, 188).

In addition, the idea that Agamben utilises Aristotle's Ontology as a mythic origin, without any further justification, is mistaken. The identification of the Ontological apparatus as the original place where 'Life' is divided with a political purpose is the result of an archaeological investigation which seeks to uncover how it became possible for our contemporary concept of life to emerge. As I demonstrated above, Agamben shows that 'Life' becomes a unitary referent only as a consequence of a political-logical operation which he locates within the structure of Aristotle's Ontology and which, in significant ways, is taken up by the philosophical tradition from Christianity through to Heidegger.
Agamben's argument is articulated in two major ways: 1) Agamben utilises a structural approach which uncovers a 'presuppositional apparatus' in a range of areas of inquiry (political, medical, grammatical).

2) A historical/philological critique, reconstructing the history of the concept 'Life' which undermines the dogmas of anthropology and sociology concerning the 'ambiguity of the sacred' and the sources of political power and authority. As I mentioned above, both of these procedures are inspired by the Nietzschean tradition which aims to rehabilitate the Dionysian in culture by liberating language and life from 'Grammar'. In a subsequent chapter I will show how 'Grammar' as a science emerges precisely from Aristotle's Ontological apparatus. For now, lets us turn to the structural history of what Agamben calls 'Western Ontology'.

# Structure of the Exception

Agamben's archaeology of Ontology uncovers a structural analogy between the way in which life is made sacred by becoming a unitary referent for politics and science, and the way in which letters become the foundation for speech. Both these processes take place within Aristotle's Ontology. Agamben calls this structure of thought a 'presuppositional apparatus', or in some places the 'state of exception'. Stefano Oliva summarises how this structure of thought operates: "When we trace a distinction – for example, between bare life and the "qualified" life of *zoon politikon* – one of the poles is projected in an abstract past and appears as the foundation presupposed by the distinction itself. As we will see, conversely, what is excluded does not pre-exist at the opposite pole because both terms are determined by an act of decision that distinguishes and at the same time ties together what lies in and what lies out of the fixed rule" (Oliva 2015, 207).

This 'state of exception' or 'emergency' occurs when the law applies in full force whilst removing its jurisdiction, as demonstrated in the detailed analysis in Homos Sacer Volume 1 and Homo Sacer 2.1 (Agamben,2017) is the equivalent of the semiotic dogma which claims that even when not attempting or appearing to speak according to rules of language, human utterances contain a minimal quanta of signification or intention to signify. Just as bare life is a 'degree zero' of humanity, so the 'inarticulate voice' retains a degree zero of generic semiotic value. Neither can be conceived of in separation from the system which seeks to capture them but in face isolates them first as a foundation in need of or responsible for 'ordering'. The sanctity of human life is not an inherent property of the human living being but the deadly consequence of legal and political classification that owes its origins to the Ontological apparatus handed down by the metaphysical tradition.

In Agamben's work this presuppositional apparatus effects several domains of the philosophical tradition and exposes the underlying mechanism of several domains:

1)Ontology – In order to relate to the world, language transforms 'nature' into 'being' which is presupposed as a removed and abstracted foundation. This is done by separating 'first being' from all the ways in which it is categorised and conceived thus leading to the philosophical and scientific structure of a 'substance' underlying its 'predicates'.

2)Semiotics: In order to determine itself as signifying, language has presupposed a bare or non-articulate voice as a foundation. It does so by separating life from language and then inscribing letters into the human voice, thus presupposing speech as always already completely writable (phonetic Grammar). Language is then separated into two orders – semiotic and semantic, without being able to articulate a connection between them except through the presupposition of 'letters' as a natural element.

3)Biology – One aspect of the organism is separated as reduced to a generic foundation common to all species. Despite the variety of life and cultures all are said to share and participate in a generic, abstract and silent substance called 'Life' which remains scientifically unidentifiable except as that which can be isolated from all actual life -forms – that is, at death. The irreducible killable element of organisms is seen as their common referent and foundation.

4)Politics – Life became a sacred referent by reinscribing 'Natural Life' within a political order as 'bare-life'. Upon this bare life, sovereign power claims its authority by inscribing bare-life into the legal order as 'sacred', which a historical analysis reveals to mean 'killable with impunity. The pre-political or 'state of nature' is thus generated and presupposed by the legal order rather than exist as a historical reality prior to its constitution. The original political relation is not the contract but a kind of *'vita nullius'*: the sovereign ban or exclusion of natural life and its reinscription within the law as a bare and 'sacred' referent.

5)Ethics – Life is separated into two domains: Conscious and Unconscious, Authentic and Artificial, or Ontological and Ontic – each time the former remains a more 'real' and original source of motivations, desires and experiences despite remaining hidden, inarticulable, and despite its generic quality, nonetheless individual and singular. This way, human beings are separated from their common life in language and divided into individual entities all said to contain a unique mystery and secret, the task of which is, with the aid of institutional experts, only theirs to decipher.

Agamben attempts to locate these structures as emerging from the 'Ontological Apparatus' as deployed by Aristotle. The overarching nature of this type of argument has prompted critics to dismiss Agamben's work as simplistic and overly abstract. Finlayson is exemplary in this regard and argues that: "Contra Agamben, I think that the very idea of a single underlying paradigm of Western politics since the Greeks is ridiculous, that his diagnosis of contemporary society is wholly unpersuasive, and that his social theory has no critical purchase whatsoever on the current

political state of affairs. The argument I pursue here, however, focuses mainly on the textual evidence on which Agamben bases his thesis of the destiny of Western politics, evidence which consists almost entirely of an erroneous albeit widespread and hence not yet discredited reading of Aristotle's Politics." (Finalyson 2010, 99).

Agamben's point is not simply philological, nor is he claiming that this paradigm of thought is articulated verbatim by Aristotle despite the fact that Agamben mobilises a significant number of textual examples that can be read this way (Agamben 2017, Introduction and 1131-1149 and 1203-1214). For Agamben, the *zoe/bios* distinction is to be understood in the context of a structure of exception, but it is the relationship between the terms and not simply their distinction that is crucial. A philological rebuttal is insufficient without taking into account the structural context of the point.

Finalyson takes this into consideration and thus aims his critique at precisely this structural point which for him remains abstract. He therefore raises the by now common claim that: "The truth is that Agamben does not discover a concealed biopolitical paradigm stretching back to fourth-century Athens; rather he invents one" (Finalyson, 2010,116).

This is precisely the strength of Agamben's point. The archaeological investigation he develops is not premised simply on the discovery of an originary distinction in Aristotle but on a detailed historical examination of language and political history which uncovers a shared common structure. Insofar as all the elements of the presuppositional apparatus can be found together wholesale within Aristotle's corpus then it is plausible to suggest that a body of work that has had profound impact on Western culture can be seen as a decisive historical articulation of a cultural tendency and mechanism.

## Appetite for Destruction

We saw above how Aristotle develops his political and biological analysis following the demands of a conceptual structure. Accordingly, 'Life' emerges as politico-logical concept, not a natural or religious one. This why the interrogation of the dogma of the sanctity of life finds recourse to an archaeology of Ontology, and not, following Foucault, simply a critique of modern scientific thought.

In an important and influential study, a recent interpreter pointed out that Agamben's project consists of a reframing of Heidegger's Ontological difference in a biological key (Abbott, 2016). Insofar as Heidegger distinguishes Ontological Being from the ontic beings which are said to be predicated upon it, he shows that we have neglected to enquire into the 'meaning of Being'. Abbott therefore claims that Agamben transposes this distinction into that of *Zoe*/*Bios* and shows how *Zoe* becomes the silent unthematised referent of *Bios* to the point of their convergence and sacralisation.

In this sense Abbott correctly claims that Agamben should be considered a thinker of a 'political Ontology' (Abbott, Ibid.) But this is true only if by Ontology we understand not only the way in which 'being' is conceived but the very notion that 'being can be said'. If Agamben is deploying a political Ontology it is not only in order to rethink ontological categories for the sake of renewing them but to question the very relationship between politics and Ontology and thus undermine the power that ancient Ontology has on our culture. Reversing Heidegger's claim that traditional Ontology occluded the ontological difference, Agamben shows how it was Aristotle himself who devised an originary ontological difference when he constructed an ontological apparatus premised on the division of being insofar as it can be 'said'.

Agamben understands from Heidegger that the interrogation of the philosophical tradition has to begin from taking the Ontological distinction into account for it is the Ontological distinction that allows Ontology to develop into a tradition in the first place. But for this reason, the critique of Ontology is not a continuation of Heideggerianism but a mobilisation of its explanatory power for the sake of a complete rejection of the legacy Heidegger exposes.

Agamben transposes Heidegger's ontological difference onto a biological register in order to show that the critique of the latter entails the critique of the former. Therefore, any attempt to move beyond a sacralised concept of life must at the same time question the very ontological difference that made such a sacralisation possible.

If *Zoe* was the foundation of the Dionysian religion, this was based on the infinite and no-representable element of nature experienced through rapture and ecstasy. The politicisation of bare natural life that Aristotle carries out through the encryption of letters within the human voice is the transformation of *Zoe* from a cultic non politicisable experience of life into the foundation of a political

order. For Aristotle, Ontology is the religion of *Zoe* understood as 'bare life'. Therefore, it is Ontology as such – the way in which it claims that language is said to relate to the world- that must be called into question, not simply this or that variation of it. For this reason, Agamben can place his project as an attempt to interrogate the ways in which the living being has been captured by the apparatus of language such that it calls its own life into question through the very words it speaks: *"It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion*" (Agamben 2017, 354). The critique of the sanctity of life is possible only if we critique the very way in which we are accustomed to relating being and language.

Socrates claimed that 'the unexamined life is not worth living". But as Agamben shows "*A genealogy of the concept of zoè must begin from the recognition—not initially to be taken for granted—that in Western culture "life" is not a medical-scientific notion but a philosophico-political concept*" (Agamben, 2017, 1203). Agamben's studies allow us to challenge the conceptions of life and thought behind the original Socratic assertion which has too often been understood as a lethal proposition that claims that there are certain forms of life not worthy of philosophy, hence not worthy of living. The separation of the living being from the political animal and the split between articulate and inarticulate language together form the definition of metaphysics, the bloody legacy of which Agamben entrusts his readers to overcome.

If Agamben is correct in his analysis then the 'destruction of tradition' that Heidegger embarked on remains incomplete. If contemporary human beings wish to regain some opening into the historical condition of their culture rather than succumbing to a global nihilism that does not even recognise itself as a historical culture then contemporary philosophy faces two options : 1)further destruction of the Western philosophical tradition to the point of bidding farewell to Greek philosophy as Ontology or 2) a continuous re-reading of the tradition in such a way as to find a different path to relate to the Greek philosophical project of rendering being explicable in language and hence providing a historical dimension to contemporary culture which seems to have lost it way. Agamben's philosophy seems to hesitate between these two options whilst simultaneously showing how the first option can perhaps best be accomplished by exploring the second. This is why, ultimately the farewell to Ontology seems to be possible only through a revision of what Ontology means in the first place.

Agamben's investigation shows that in Western culture 'Life' is not a medical-scientific notion but a philsophico-political concept. That is why an interrogation into the meaning and sanctity of life must be undertaken as a critique of the fundamental philosophical and political concepts that have determined how we think of ourselves. The notion of 'Life' must be interrogated through an interrogation of the history of Ontology, which prior to any science, determines the conditions of possibility for the construction of any such thing as a science in the first place. As we shall see in the next chapter this can only be done by examining the role that alphabetisation had on the conception of language that determines Aristotle's philosophy and its impact on his, and hence our, conception of 'Life'.

# Chapter 2

## On the Birth of Philosophy from the Spirit of the Alphabet

The historical scholarship regarding the invention of the alphabet which we discuss in the following chapter shows that the dominant conception of language that has shaped Western reflections and science is based on a phonetic understanding of language which was developed based on the specificity of the ancient Greek alphabet. Our preconception of what language is and what it can do is always already based on a specific concept of literacy that guarantees that language transmits and creates objective knowledge. The historical analysis that is developed below is presented as a response to a central concern of Agamben's philosophy and therefore aims to take up his speculative philosophical archaeology in a more directly materialist fashion. After discussing Agamben's philosophical claims the chapter presents detailed historical material and analysis of the origins of the ancient Greek alphabet and the consequences this development had for philosophy. From my analysis it is possible to conclude that Aristotle's Ontology owes its coherence to the Ancient Greek development of a fully phonetic alphabet that claimed to adequately capture human speech in the form of written letters.

Agamben's philosophy, from beginning to end, is concerned with the apparently simple notion that language exists – that there is language. For Agamben it is *"the fact of the pure and simple existence of language, independently of its emergence in this or that language, in this or that Grammar, in this or that signifying proposition*" (Agamben, 2018b,27) that is the object of philosophical analysis and speculation. The interrogation of this fact remains the only possible task for a contemporary philosophy

Agamben's claim – there is language- should not be mistaken as indicating some kind of human essence or superiority, nor as an empirical scientific fact but rather as pointing to the ontological reality of language. Language is not an empirical object amongst others in the world but the very element that makes an experience of the world possible for human beings. Because of this we don't, and perhaps can't, have a clear idea of what language really is.

Yet, we can attest to its existence and no matter how hard we try, we cannot get rid of it. For, as he acknowledges, "*although there were and are, in every age and place, societies whose customs appear to us barbaric, or anyway unacceptable, and more or less numerous human groups willing to question every rule, culture or tradition; although wholly criminal societies have existed and exist, moreover, and, after all, there is no norm or value whose legitimacy everyone could unanimously agree about, there nonetheless never is or ever was any community, or society, or group that purely and simply chose to renounce language*". (Agamben, 2018b, 1).

What does it mean to suppose that language exists? What does it mean if "*in the definition according to which man is the living being that has language, the decisive element is clearly not life, but language*"? (Agamben, 2018b,2) After all, we only ever encounter a plurality of languages of existing spoken languages and cultures. We never come face to face with a thing called language as such. Curiously, as Agamben points out, "*humans are unable to say what is involved for them in language as such, in the sheer fact that they speak*". (Agamben, Ibid.).

More than a simple empirical or historical issue, this inability to speak of the fact that we speak raises some ethical implications of language, particularly in relation to the meaning of tradition because human beings "*obstinately continue to speak and transmit language to their progeny, without knowing whether this is the highest good or the worst of misfortunes*" (Agamben, 2018b,1) This ambiguity has led to endless reflection on the nature of language, its uses and disadvantages, and breeding extremes of idealistic linguaphilia encountered in the obsessive natures of literary or poetic types and a hatred and suspicion of language amongst the more fundamentalist religious or sceptical types. As Agamben correctly observes, these extremes nonetheless betray a solidarity: "*the risks and damages implicit in the use of language have been perceived several times in the course of history: religious and philosophical communities in both West and East practiced silence- or "aphasia", as the ancient skeptics called it- but silence and aphasia were only a trial aimed at a better use of language and reason, and not an unconditional dismissal of the faculty of speech, which in all traditions seems inseparable from what is human.*" (Agamben, 2018b,1).

The attempt to speak of the fact that we speak has traditionally been carried out with an occlusion of the fact of language in favour of a presupposition of what language already is. This has led to three dominant scientific myths in our culture : 1) that there is an origin to language 2) that what separates humans from animals is the faculty of speech and therefore the essence of the human lies in the nature of its language and 3) despite the obvious antiquity of speech and, in terms of human history, the

relative newness of writing, we believe that spoken language can be interpreted only the basis of written language.

These myths have given birth to religion and science as we are familiar with them in Western culture, which owes its coherence as a culture to an interpretation of language and not to any natural evolutionary or historical essence.

It is easy to dismiss the first myth without recourse to too much historical investigation. As Emile Benveniste (1973) has pointed out, the obvious dependence of language and thought upon one another already determines that an attempt to think about language is always carried out from within language itself. The question of the origin of language is itself a linguistic question.

This exposes the second myth and shows the weakness of contemporary evolutionist theories regarding the origin of language that attempt to deduce a primordial non - linguistic human being on the basis of Darwinist inspired speculation. Numerous, and from our perspective hideous, experiments have attempted to attest to the role language plays in human development. Whether by deliberately depriving infants of speech or interrogating the cognitive capacities of so called 'feral-children' raised without human adults the results have always pointed to the centrality of language acquisition in the development of a human being after a certain age (around the onset of puberty), a human is no longer able to acquire full capacity of speech and its communicative abilities are significantly threatened. How then can we attest to the existence of what we know to be a human being that would have existed without language and yet all of a sudden acquired the capacity to do so?

It was the Darwinian biologist Ernest Haeckel who proposed, on the basis of paleontological evidence discovered in Java by Eugen Dubois, an evolutionary phase of humanity in which he thought there existed a type of human being he referred to as the '*sprachloser Urmensch'*: a being without language suspended between animality and full humanity (Haeckel,1900). The philologist Herman Steinthal, initially an advocate of this idea, exposed the aporias in this conception when he realised that the conception of language that Haeckel had at his disposal, a fully articulated historical and grammatical language, was simultaneously presupposed and removed in order to make the hypothesis plausible (See Agamben, 2004). Unable to conceive of language in any other way than on the basis of written language that defines the essence of humanity, Darwinian zoologists equate non-speaking human beings with animals. As Steinthal recognised:

*"The prelinguistic stage of intuition can only be one, not double, and it cannot be different for animal or man. If it were different, that is, if man were naturally higher than the animal, then the origin of man would not coincide with the origin of language, but rather with the origin of his higher form of intuition out of the lower form which is the animal's. Without realising it, I presupposed this origin: in reality, man with his human characteristics was given to me through creation, and I then sought to discover the origin of language in man. But in this way I contradicted my presupposition: that is, that the origin of language and the origin of man were one and the same: I set man up first and then had him produce language".* (Steinthal, quoted in Agamben, 2004, 36-7)

In a detailed analysis of central chapters in the history of philosophy, anthropology and zoology, Agamben (2004) convincingly argues that the object of anthropomorphisation is in reality humanity itself, which must be conceived of as an 'animal' only in order to then be granted the privilege of shedding that animality by having a 'language' Questioning all natural-scientific myths concerning the origin of humanity and containing a barely concealed refutation of Nietzsche's Zarathustra who proclaimed that 'the human is a bridge between the animal and the superman'(Nietzsche, 1964), Agamben mobilises a devastating critique of central anthropomorphic myths of modern science. The production of animality and humanity as scientific entities is a result of what Agamben calls the "Anthropological Machine" (Agamben, 2004) The 'Anthropological Machine' is a form of analysis that constructs humanity and animality through a specific operation that attributes language or its absence to either pole of the machine. This machine is a structure of analysis and cultural production blind to its own linguistic presuppositions, with devastating consequences.

As we saw in the cases of Haeckel and Steinthal "*what distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given already inherent in in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical* production *which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man or animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a nonspeaking man- Homo alalus, precisely- who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. But all evidence suggests that this is only a shadow cast by language, a presupposition of speaking man, by which we always obtain only an animalisation of man (an animal-man, like Haeckel's ape-man) or a humanisation of the animal (a man-ape). The animal-man and the man-animal are the two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side.*" (Agamben, 2004,36).

How is it that language comes to be understood as the essence of humanity, distinguishing it from other animals and yet as an element that can be isolated and removed in order to generate a non-humanity or animality? The anthropological machine functions through a self-cancelling logic whereby one of its poles is operational only insofar as it removes from itself the other – in order to function, the machine eliminates one of the elements it requires to function. If the essence of humanity, separating it from other animals is said to be language, this essence cannot be understood as a natural evolutionary element but rather a cultural production that remains to be investigated As we shall see, it is in Aristotle's philosophy that this auto-anthropomorphic myth becomes the foundation of a political and ethical vision form which we have yet to emerge.

It is in a passage from Aristotle's *Politics,* as famous as it is foundational, that Agamben locates all three founding myths on the origin of language that I mentioned aboVe. The three myths are combined through the articulation of a specifically political myth that serves as the basis for our notions of humanity, science and society.

In a passage from Aristotle's *Politics,* the philosopher infamously claims that:

*"Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensations of pain and pleasure and of signifying the two). But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city."* (Aristotle, in Agamben, 2017, Introduction).

Commenting on this passage Agamben will stake his philosophical ambition in proclaiming that: "*The question 'in what way does the living being have language' corresponds exactly to the question" In what way does bare life dwell in the polis*?" (Agamben, Ibid.) The critique of the way in which our culture articulates the political equation between language and life is at the heart of Agamben's philosophical project, and only a sufficient understanding of his analysis will allow us to grasp the meaning of the fact that -there is language- beyond any mythological presuppositions.

Attempting to counter the myths of linguistics, Agamben, in a speculative vein proposes a philosophical myth of his own. Reflecting on the undeniable impact of alphabetisation on "our culture", the philosopher proposes that:

"*At this stage, we can advance a hypothesis on the origin of language that is not more mythological than others (philosophical hypotheses necessarily have a mythical character, that is, they are always "narrations," and the rigor of thought consists precisely in recognizing them as such, not confusing them with principles). Like all animals, the primate that was going to develop into Homo sapiens was always endowed with a language, which was certainly different but perhaps not so dissimilar from the one we know. What happened was that at a certain point—coinciding with anthropogenesis—the primate of the genus homo became aware of having a language [lingua], that is, he separated it from himself and exteriorized it out of himself as an object, and then began to consider, analyze, and elaborate it in an incessant process—in which philosophy, Grammar, logic, psychology, and computer science followed one another with many twists and turns—a process that has perhaps not yet been accomplished. And since he had expelled his language out of himself, unlike other animals, man had to learn to transmit it exosomatically, from mother to son, in such a way that in the course of generations language [lingua] was chaotically divided and increasingly changed according to places and times. And, having separated his language [lingua] from himself to entrust it to a historical tradition, for the speaking man, life and language, nature and history were divided and, at the same time, articulated with each other. Language [lingua], which had been expelled outside, was reinscribed in the voice through phonemes, letters, and syllables, and the analysis of language [lingua] coincided with the articulation of the voice (the articulated voice of humans as opposed to the disarticulated voice of the animal).*

*This means that language is neither a human invention nor a divine gift, but a middle term between them, which is located in a zone of indifference between nature and culture, endosomatic and exosomatic (the splitting of human language into langue and speech, semiotic and semantic, synchrony and diachrony corresponds to this bipolarity). This also means that man is not simply homo sapiens, but first and foremost homo sapiens loquendi, the living being that does not merely speak, but knows how to speak, in the sense that the knowledge of language [lingua]—even in its most elementary form—must necessarily precede any other knowledge".* (Agamben, 2018b, 12).

This is not a myth. In order to understand what made it possible for Aristotle to transform the Socratic injunction into a foundation for a eugenics programme it is necessary to investigate the origin of the third myth: the alleged dependence of speech on writing. This myth is central to our inquiry and the basis on which the other two myths become plausible. Where Agamben's philosophical speculation ends, a materialist analysis of the history of writing will show that the alleged always already split and 'writable' nature of speech is a philosophical and political interpretation of language that was

afforded on the basis of the particular structure and status of the Greek alphabet. By the time Aristotle formalises Ontology on the basis of a phonetic and semiotic conception of speech, he does so by occluding the material and technical origin of these notions. Ontology thereby claims to be based on a hidden and silent foundation and cannot account for its genesis and plausibility without recourse to naturalistic and dangerous myths.

## Philosophy is a Twenty-Four-Letter Word

The fundamental influence of alphabetic writing on our culture determines the nature of reflections on the origin of language and impacts the fundamental presuppositions of Western linguistic science. It also allowed for the emergence of philosophy and has since then held sway over our political and pedagogical imagination. It is thus a central and fundamental myth of Western culture. Its critique is therefore central to our inquiry.

Critical of the a-historical studies of technology which take the idea of a sovereign individual for granted, new German media historians like Kittler, Siegert and Vissman have shown how the alphabet is first and foremost a ‘cultural technique’: a tool or media that determines the scope of action for a subject (see Siegert 2015). German Media theory emerged in the 1980’s, primarily through the efforts of Friedrich Kittler and his students who, in the words of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: “aimed to replace the hegemony of understanding, which inevitably tied meaning to a variant of subjectivity or self-presence, with ‘the materialities of communication” (Gumbrecht in Siegert, 2015, 2). Borrowing from Foucault's historical reconstructions of ‘episteme’ as a kind of ‘historical a-priori’, the media theorists wished to search for the ‘technical a-priori’ that revealed the conditions of possibility for the production of culture and subjects of culture.

The shift towards investigating the material conditions of possibility for cultural production has generated a series of analyses that claim to expose the specificity of the cultural conditions and technologies that allowed for the emergence of the literacy and in terms, ‘philosophy’ as distinct forms of human praxis : “In contrast to content analysis or the semantics of representation, German media theory shifted the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation, from semantics to the exterior and material conditions that constitute semantics. Media therefore was not

only an alternative frame of reference for philosophy and literature but also an attempt to overcome French theory's fixation on discourse by turning it from its philosophical or archaeological head on to its historical and technological feet" (Siegert, 2015, 2).

A cultural technique is such an instrument or system that achieves a quasi-autonomy from its users and in turn shapes them as implicated by it. This often leads to an identification of a cultural practice with the technique that enables or impacts it. In a now canonical explanation, Thomas Macho puts it thus: "Cultural techniques – such as writing, reading, painting, counting, making music – are always older than the concepts that are generated from them. People wrote long before they conceptualized writing or alphabets; millennia passed before pictures and statues gave rise to the concept of the image; and until today, people sing or make music without knowing anything about tones or musical notation systems. Counting, too, is older than the notion of numbers. To be sure, most cultures counted or performed certain mathematical operations; but they did not necessarily derive from this a concept of number." (Macho 2003, 179).

To study cultural techniques means to move away from teleological visions of history, whether of progress or decline and to focus on the strictly ontological relation between technologies and subjects. Vissman has explained how "to inquire about cultural techniques is not to ask about the feasibility, success, chances and risks of certain innovations and inventions in the domain of the subject. Instead, it is to ask about the self-management or auto-praxis [*Eigenpraxis*] of media and things, which determines the scope of the subject's field of action" (Vismann 2013, 84).

The alphabet, like a horse, or a house, determines the ways in which people are constructed as actors, in this case as speaking and writing beings. Indeed, Vissman explicitly uses the analogy of Grammar: "Cultural techniques define the agency of media and things. If media theory were, or had, a Grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs. Grammatical persons (and human beings alike) would then assume the place assigned for objects in a given sentence. From the perspective of media, such a reversal of positions may well be the most prominent feature of a theory of cultural techniques." (Vissman, 2013., 83).

A phonetic alphabet shapes speech into separate elements, it creates the illusion that language is always already entirely transcribable - leading to the common assumption that to speak is in fact to 'sound out letters' - and thereby enables a culture and type of human beings in its image. Due to its

dominance, the alphabet has generated a culture that restricts the meaning of language to that which is phonetic - writeable, articulate and repeatable – in other words, literacy becomes the dominant paradigm through which human communication (and hence administration) is both constructed and understood.

From this perspective, shibboleths of post-structural and post-metaphysical critique reveal themselves to be a-historical and idealist insofar as they ignore the empirical/historical conditions of the emergence of cultural phenomena. As Kittler showed, following his study of Goody's work on literacy, Derrida's diagnosis of Rousseau's orality remained stuck in a thoroughly ahistorical phonocentrism. In Kittler's reading, this orality becomes the result of historico-empirical cultural techniques of specifically 18th-century oral pedagogy centred around maternal care (Kittler, 1990 and Siegert, 2105).

Kittler's efforts have also challenged the dominant paradigm of classical studies that, from Jaspers hypothesis of an 'axial age' to Vernant and Vidal Naquet's celebration of the alleged 'secularisation' of Greek society, claimed that rationalisation was the process of ideological and institutional innovation. Kittler showed that "the triumphal progress of the vocalic alphabet seems less to be the result of an overestimated degree of innovation rather than of the unambiguity of its phoneme allocation. This minimised the effort required for literacy and thus transferred palace and temple secrets to the public domain. It became possible for literature firstly to incorporate oral mnemonics (such as airs or rhapsodies) and later also prose. Athenian tyrants founded the first public library; the bookworm Euripides became the "first great reader" among writer" (Kittler 1996, 5).

The singularity of the Greek alphabet was that it constituted a vocalic representation – a conscious effort to not only represent the sounds of speech but to do so as identifiable and divisible elements. As Barry Powell has convincingly argued "humans cannot distinguish sounds in speech smaller than the syllable unless trained in some form of the Greek vocal alphabet. Nor is human speech made up of little pieces, of phonemes awaiting graphic representation, as alphabet users want to believe, although illiterates can separate out syllabic units when prompted. Speech is nonetheless a wave, a continuum." (Powell 2012, 231). Powell demonstrates Kittler's thesis regarding phonetisation when he shows how the Greek technique of transcription creates the illusion of capturing speech: "It is inaccurate to say that the inventor of the Greek alphabet "added vowels" to a previously vowelless script, when the concept "vowel" depends on how the Greek alphabet functions and not on objective features of human speech. The inventor of the Greek alphabet did not "add vowels," therefore, but

remade the internal structure of his model by means of two deliberate innovations. First, he divided the entirely phonetic signs of the very old and very short West Semitic signary, in which all signs were of a single nature, into two unequal groups of signs of different natures. Second, he established the rigorous spelling rule, never violated, that a sign from the smaller group must always accompany signs from the larger group. The five signs in the small group, which represented a selection of five vowel qualities (Latin vox = "voice") from a larger range in Greek speech, were pronounceable by themselves, as vowel signs had been in Aegean and cuneiform writing. But the signs in the second and larger group, the "consonants," were not pronounceable by themselves, as they had been in West Semitic writing. These signs were incomplete without an appended sign from the smaller group, with which they could "sound along" (Latin consono). The inventor's spelling rule, devised for a practical purpose, inadvertently created the illusion that speech consists of particulate phonemes and the prejudice that writing exists to record speech." (Powell, 2012, 232).

Jan Assman, relying on Havelock but distancing himself from the latter's triumphalism, concurs that "It was not simply writing as such but the introduction of the alphabet that led to this new intellectual "discipline" that Eric Havelock convincingly argues represented the "birth of philosophy from the spirit of writing." (Assman 2011, 234-235). Seen from this perspective, the shift to alphabetisation seems less of a clean-cut transition from 'myth' to 'science' but more like a mythology premised on the idea of the perfect capture of the human voice, thereby resembling the process described by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) through which a technology that presents itself as a form of enlightenment in fact generates a new myth.

Literacy precedes scientific questions on the origins of language, the search for which remains a common-place of philosophical speculation from at least Plato onwards. Detailed investigations of the origin of language are primarily interrogations stemming from written language, not oral speech. It is only once language is written down and speech becomes frozen in time as an independent entity that a question can emerge about its temporal nature. Language then is said to have a past that demands investigation as to its origin.

From the perspective of modern linguistics, language is an abstraction from verbal communication. It is "a system of decontextualized verbal signs, organised into complexes called 'sentences' and mastery of a language is interpreted as mastery of the decontextualized system" (Harris 1981, 32). This interpretation is shared by historical and structuralist linguistics and persists through the naturalisation of those disciplines in contemporary Chomskyan and bio-cognitive understandings of the nature of

speech. No matter how the origin of language is conceptualised, to speak a language well is seen as an ability to master a series of codes which are based on a limited number of written symbols. This remains the dominant ideal which dictates linguistic instruction in both educational institutions and projects of linguistic revival or restoration. Other than in perhaps the early stages of infancy, language is taught through written symbols as a restricted semiotic code. In other words, it is conceived of as owing its coherence to a form of writing.

The idea of language presented here was and remains unknown to oral cultures. “The historian misreads prehistory when he assumes that “language can be spoken in that word-less world. In the oral beyond, there is no “content” distinct from the winged word that always rushes before it has been fully grasped, no “subject matter” that can be conceived of, entrusted to teachers, and acquired by pupils (hence no “education”, “learning”, and “school”). For it is the record in phonetic writing that first carries what is heard across a chasm separating two heterogenous eras of speech. The alphabetic scribe carries what is spoken from the ever-passing moment and sets down what he has heard in the permanent space of language. Only with this act can knowledge, separate from speech, be born.” (Illich and Sanders 1988, 7-8).

Ivan Illich explained how “Only the alphabet has the power to create ‘language’ and ‘words’, for the word does not emerge until it is written down. Neither the songs of the poets, not the invocations of the priests, not the dictates of rulers from prehistoric times are sequences of words. There immense yet evanescent power eludes description, and those who uttered them were unable, for all their oral skill, to see their own speech as a string on which words are the beads. Prehistory knows nothing of these mono- or polysyllabic atoms of language whose semantic fields we plot with our dictionaries. What prehistory perceives as units can only have audible contours. The sequences of sound between pauses that characterise speech are not words but syllables, phrases, strophes. It is to these measures of speech alone that the original *word* or Logos relates” (Illich and Sanders, 1988, 7).

However, despite what seems unquestioned to people living in a society of mandatory literacy, writing was not originally invented to represent speech. The first known form of writing, Mesopotamian Cunieform, long predating the Greek phonetic alphabet, was not intended as a technique to capture or instruct speech. It was originally developed for administrative purposes - for making lists. Scholars studying the history of Cuneiform argue that the first known examples we have of writing should not really even be categorised as anything we would today consider a language.

Peter Damerow lists 5 major reasons why this is the case:

1)They imply only simple patterns of semantic categories.
2) In proto-cuneiform, phonetic coding plays only a minor role, if any.
3) Proto-cuneiform is not uniformly conventionalized.
4) Contrary to oral language, proto-cuneiform is used in an extremely restricted context of application.
5)Proto-cuneiform had precursors in symbolic systems used, at least in part, for the same purposes. (Damerow 2006, 4)

In her study on the relation between writing and administration the German media scholar Claudia Vissman confirms Damrerow's findings and suggests that "a form of literacy that stands in no relationship to speech, hints at the origins of the complicity of writing and the law. Archaeological evidence suggests that this complicity can be found in lists, especially in those featuring nonsyntactical sign systems" (Vissman 2008, 6).

She develops her claim by re-visiting the mid- 20th century polemic between Spengler and Leo Oppenheim regarding the nature of Babylonian cuneiform: "The Babylonian Empire in the third millennium BC was suffused with lists: lists on the per-capita consumption of female workers, lists containing inventories of wheat and beer, lists with names of trees, shrubs, and administrative offices, lists for those training to become compilers of lists. For a long time, they remained unread. Their deciphering was hampered by a phonological concept of writing that took the signs on shards to be narrative texts. Referring to Egyptian writing, Oswald Spengler rejected this hypothesis in 1935 by alluding to a nonsyntactic formation of signs: "The hope of deducing a language from such pictorial signs," he wrote, "is based ... on the ignorance of the fact that they are not composed of sentences." It was only after dropping the assumption that the strange signs conform to the logic of Grammar, sentence, and line that they were revealed to be accounting lists based on a nonsyntactic order. In 1959 the philologist Leo Oppenheim was able to start deciphering Babylonian tablets by reading them as administrative notes rather than epical texts*" (*Vismann, 2008, 6-7).

Furthermore, recent scholarship has emphasised the autonomy of writing from oral speech. Ruth Finnegan summarises this view, commenting on Jack Goody's seminal work, and referencing Mignolo and Boone: "In fact, not all writing systems are parasitic on spoken language or directly

representative of it—unless, that is, one takes the narrowest of definitions by which only alphabetic scripts can qualify as "true" writing. Some recent analysts argue convincingly that such examples as Chinese writing or Mesoamerican pictorial and hieroglyphic systems can be described as semasiographic in that, in contrast to phonographic systems, the visible marks "communicate meaning directly . . .independently from language; here the meaning is not ultimately reducible to, or a transcription of, spoken words" (Finnegan 2006, 265).

Mignolo, whose own research has been fundamental in advancing a decolonising critique of alphabetisation (Mignolo,1994) has shown in his study of Mesoamerican colonisation that "Speech and writing, in Amerindian societies, were not related and were not conceived in the same way that they were in Greece and in the construction of the Western tradition." (Mignolo 1994, 298). Prior to the Spanish conquest it is crucial to remember that "in Mesoamerica the writing systems in place did not distinguish writing from painting, as they did not consider writing a surrogate or a tool for controlling the voice, even if in Maya writing phonetic instructions were part of their logograms" (Mignolo, 1994, 295).

The absence of writing from cultures not colonised by the West generated sleepless nights amongst European anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss. Claude Levi-Strauss, not shy himself of the written word, reflected at length on the meaning of writing after a sleepless night prompted by his attempt to teach writing to the chief of a tribe that had not yet acquired, let alone seen such an apparatus (Lev-Strauss, 1961). First, the anthropologist recognises, that without even recognising the function of writing as a system of knowledge or interpretation, the chief of the tribe could not fail to notice that it bestowed on him some kind of power: "it had been borrowed as a symbol, and for a sociological rather than an intellectual purpose, while its reality remained unknown. It had not been a question of acquiring knowledge, of remembering or understanding, but rather of increasing the authority and prestige of one individual- or function- at the expense of others" (Levi-Strauss 1961, 287-297).

The power of writing abstracted from its utilisation for epistemological or semiotic purposes prompted Levi-Strauss to a series of profound reflections that speculate on the origin of writing and its function. The most important point of his text comes when the famed anthropologist toys with the idea that "After eliminating all the criteria which have been put forward to distinguish between civilisation and barbarism, it is tempting to retain this one at least: there are peoples with, or without, writing" (Levi-Strauss, 1961, 291). Yet, upon further reflection he notes that nonetheless "nothing we know about

writing and the part it has played in man's evolution justifies this view" (Levi -Strauss, Ibid.) – a point which he goes on to justify in the remainder of his reflections.

So, what is the purpose of writing according to Levi-Strauss, once its civilizational aura has been stripped away from it? It "seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment" (Levi Strauss, 1961, 292) For this reason, he ends his meditation with a reflection on contemporary servitude, that argues against the assumption that the origin and purpose of writing is the creation or retention of knowledge "although writing may not have been enough to consolidate knowledge, it was perhaps indispensable for the strengthening of dominion. If we look at the situation nearer home, we see that the systematic development of compulsory education in the European countries goes hand in hand with the extension of military service and proletarianization. The fight against illiteracy is therefore connected with an increase in governmental authority over the citizens. Everyone must be able to read, so that the government can say: Ignorance of the law is no excuse" (Levi-Strauss, 1961, 293).

It is important to ask therefore, by what means did a technology developed for the sake of administration and dominion come to acquire aesthetic and cultural significance to the point of being considered a civilised leisurely or creative pursuit, as most educated modern people would consider it? Levi-Strauss himself, prefiguring our notions of the value of cultural capital, points out the paradoxical nature of the fact that a technique of domination is at the same time an object of pleasure: "My hypothesis, if correct, would oblige us to recognise the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery. The use of writing for disinterested purposes, and as a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, is a secondary result, and more often than not it may be turned into a means of strengthening, justifying or concealing the other." (Levi-Strauss, 1961, 292).

The fact that a highly literate intellectual points out the hideous origins of their own pursuit is not unique to Levi-Strauss. It was Walter Benjamin, one of the most erudite of critical intellectuals, who pointed out that, "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 2006, 392). And it was none other than Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps the most talented of stylists and greatest lovers of language amongst the philosophers, who exposed in great detail the cruel and murderous origins of most 'cultural' phenomena, and who celebrated at the site of the burning Parisian monuments and museums at the hands of the Paris Communards (See Nietzsche 1966, 1967, 2005). In this way these men are echoing Plato whose work is itself a testament of the uses and disadvantages of specifically alphabetic and phonetic writing and literacy.

It is important however to consider how indeed a technique of domination and administration come to be understood as an autonomous and even pleasurable pursuit. If writing was not thought to consist of a semantic language, and was not intended to represent speech, how did it come about that it was associated with representing spoken language or parts of speech? What was the historical process enabled markings that were intended for political administration to be transformed into signs that represent and organise our representation of the world and our place in it? How did administrative markings come to be recognised as semiotic shapers of the world? The answer seems to lie in the singularity of ancient Greek alphabetisation: in the transformation that writing underwent at the hands of the ancient Greek poets and philosophers who invented the idea that letters not only codify and represent the reality of the world, but that they do so by directly capturing the physical and spoken word.

As discussed in this chapter, the historical process of the transition of writing from administrative markings, through to ideograms and logograms based on syllabary, to its emergence as a discrete phonetic system has been recounted in great detail by historians of culture and scholars of the emergence of literacy. As we know, it was only with the invention of the Greek alphabet that the phonological concept of language that we take for granted today developed. Only amongst the ancient Greeks a belief emerged that letters accurately represent the sounds of speech along with the idea that writing was invented for phonetic purposes.

Despite the Cannanite and Phoneician origins of the alphabet, "it was not until the Semitic signs were used to write down the Greek when the *matres lectionis (consonants that indicate vowels)* that were already in casual use became systematically employed to depict accurately syllabic quantity, an essential component of the Greek language" (Llano, 2006, 19). The transformation of writing into a phonetic system, beginning with earlier Semitic cultures who still used it as an aid for speech rather than a representation of it, was taken up by the Greek and 'rationalised' into a unique system of discrete units that thereby acquired unprecedented power.

Indeed, we know from scholars researching the emergence of phonetic literacy (Havelock 1963, Ong 2003, Kittler 2014) that once writing is used as a phonetic sign system it obtains a degree of autonomy that allows for a certain type of reflection on its nature. People who acquire literacy through phonetic alphabets therefore develop mechanisms of introspection, reflection, abstraction and generalisation unfamiliar to oral cultures and a separation emerges between speech and writing which sees speech

itself to be more and more influenced by its visual representation. Language therefore begins to be thought of as having two separate poles – speech on the one hand and writing on the other. The invention of notation or inscription that purports to represent or capture the sound of speech, what we refer to today as literacy, undoubtedly transforms the experience of those who acquire it in significant ways as much as it did for those who first conceived that the human voice could be represented through isolated units of writing – what the Greeks called *stoicheia* (written letters. – the term *grammata* was reserved for letters insofar as they were uttered).

Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders summarise the part of this process that matters most for our purposes best: "Greek merchants acquired the string of Semitic consonants from Syrian traders on the coast of Asia Minor. They left the sequence of letters undisturbed, with their shapes recognisable and their names unchanged, but they perverted the use of these letters. While for the Semite *beth* had a semantic association, because for him it means "house", for the Greek it is merely the name of a letter that stands for a sound. Four of the Semitic letters were not needed by the Greeks: To the Greek ear they stood for barbaric noises. The Greeks of the eighth century used them to indicate vowels. The consonants are now placed between vocals, the entire world now lies on the page." (Illich and Sanders 1988, 12).

The consequences were of course momentous. Illich continues to explain: "Phonetic script could now do the opposite of what the string of consonants had so far done. While the consonants had been used to record units of meaning that the scribe had picked from the flow of speech, the Greeks froze the flow of speech itself onto the page. The scroll had been sounded thus far through an act of interpretation of the letters; alphabetic recording that fixed sound on the page brings an utterance from that past into the present, to which the reader can listen, interpreting what he hears." (Illich, 1988, 12-13).

Manuel Llano concurs that "one of the most likely causes for the appearance of alphabetic writing is the importance of prosody in Greek verse, which turned Semitic syllabaries unprofitable for the purpose. Thus, vowels acquired substantiality and, negatively, the consonant was discovered. The syllable was broken down into two elements. This step taken by the Greeks is considerable, yet perhaps difficult to appreciate. When listening to the sounds of a language, the most noticeable elements are the vibrating column of air and the mouth modulations upon that vibration, that is, the syllable. However, the modulations alone are not the sounds of the language, they cannot be uttered without the resting point of the vocalic sound. The invention of the alphabet, it can be said, is nothing but the

invention of the consonant. The consonants do not have an empirical correlative that can be pointed at. Aristotle and Plato, for instance, refer to consonants as *aphona,* that is, "non-sounds". It allows for an atomic system that breaks down the empirical syllable into two analytical components" (Llano 2016, 18-19).

Illich creatively explains how these non-sounds raise the question of the reality of letters for the philosophers who considered their nature: "The Jew searches with his eyes for inaudible roots in order to flesh them out with his breath. The Greek picks the sound from the page and searches for the invisible ideas in the sounds the letters command him to make." (Illich and Sanders, 1988, 13).

Greek letters command the reader to form ideas in his mind. It does so by breaking the flow of speech and demanding a more precise articulation. From early on, the power of letters comes at the expense of a certain embodiment. Instead of an unbroken flow of speech, breaking the sound according to the rhythm of the breath is the particular feature of Greek alphabetisation. Nietzsche had famously argued in 'The Birth of Tragedy' (1967) that classical Greek rationalism, represented more than anyone by Socrates, owes its birth to the triumph of philosophy over the spirit of music. Greek writing can perhaps be thought of in this way as a soundless instrument- an apparatus to signify the invented permutations of the voice.

Indeed, Eric Havelock (1963) has famously deduced and celebrated the fundamentals of Plato's philosophy and his critique of poetry as a reflection on the transition to literacy in fifth century Athens. For Havelock, the technological invention of the Greek alphabet gave rise to a form of abstract and linear thought and speech that allowed for the overcoming of the oral and mythologically inspired previous Homeric culture. The limits of Havelock's analysis lie in its epistemological prejudice: the positive support of the belief that writing creates knowledge and hence is superior to speech. Havelock's interpretation begins from the perspective that assumes that literacy means phonetic literacy and that writing is assumed to be a real transcription of sound and hence indeed provides a more efficient and sophisticated means of storing knowledge and representing the world. For the same reason Havelock, along with Walter J. Ong (2002) and most scholars of literacy celebrate the Greek 'achievement' as an unquestionable cultural advancement.

Laurence De Looze, in his general assessment of the role alphabetisation plays in our culture, shows how the alphabet is based on the idea that the world can be broken down into elements (De Looze,

2016). Greek letters were called '*stoicheia,* which were also the Greek word for the elemental particles or atoms that made up the cosmos. The Greek alphabet served to as the foundation of an entire cultural world view, a scientific atomism which breaks nature down into indivisible particles: "In the use of the term inhered the idea that alphabetic letters were much more than just convenient graphic signs: rather, they were viewed as the building blocks of the cosmos, quite literally as elemental'. The full alphabet- originally 18 letters to which were added four or six more – was therefore also a kind of compendium that constructed the cosmos". (De Looze 2016, 20-32).

We know as well that for the ancient Greeks and Romans, letters were also numbers. The alphabet had both a musical and a mathematical origin and music from the Pythagorians onwards at least is considered a branch of mathematics based on clearly defined ratios. De Looze continues: "If alphabetic letters were both elements and numbers, the complete alphabet was analogous to the whole cosmos. The alphabetic order contained the building blocks of the universe…to enter the world of the alphabet was therefore, beginning with the Greeks, to enter an ordered universe... Among the Greeks we thus encounter for the first time the view that alphabetic letters provide a means of apprehending the world, of conceptualising the cosmos and one's place in it." (De Looze, 2016., 24).

This also explains the power of the Greek alphabet as a code to assimilate and transform every other language into its own system of notation. As Friedrich Kittler, the founder of German media studies, has shown the alphabet, due to its economy of literalisation. should really be considered the first algorithm. This is echoed by scholars from Burkert to Bernal who have shown how the Ancient Greeks, whilst borrowing terms and traditions from other Semitic cultures (the alphabet being a case in point) considered their alphabet to be a closed system due to the systematic nature of literalisation. Bernal, who was no Hellenophile, had to admit that "Burkert is quite right to claim that the vast majority of foreign loans did become thoroughly absorbed into the structures of Greek phonetics and morphology" (Bernal 2001,118). As we know Greek, "since the early nineteenth century, was generally considered the most perfect or, at least, the most perfectly balanced European language" (Bernal, 2001,125) but it is a material technique or apparatus of inscription that generates the illusion of so-called Greek 'exceptionalism', and in turn influenced the methods of Indo-European scholarship. Due to its racist origins and aims, this type of scholarship insisted on the purity and closure of linguistic groups. (Here we also depart from Bernal who insists on rejecting the ideological assumptions of 19th century racist historical linguistics whilst still borrowing its methods of analysis to substantiate his claims. He ends up

replacing one form of cultural bias with another when he champions Afro-asiaticism in place of Hellenophilia simply due to the antiquity of the former).

Despite the still dominant prejudice of cultural progress in contemporary society, it is not necessary to think of writing as a phonetic inscription system. Only a teleological evolutionary view of history would assume that complete phonetisation was a natural development of earlier systems of notation. Rather, this is something that only took place once and under very particular cultural circumstances. The transition from a syllabic to a purely alphabetic language is, as far as evidence permits, something that only happened to one language: ancient Greek. It is therefore not a necessary evolutionary development. If the transition is not historically necessary, then neither is the cultural interpretation of alphabetisation. Against those like Havelock and Ong who celebrate the 'Greek miracle' as justification for contemporary cultural chauvinism, we can conclusively reject teleological and evolutionary histories of the transition to Literacy. As Llano points out, the cultural peculiarities of ancient Greek culture can be identified and isolated at least up to a point due to the fact of its historical uniqueness: "The progression from a syllabary into an alphabet historically only took place once, when a West Semitic syllabary was transformed in the Greek alphabet, there is not enough evidence to perform an inductive reasoning and conclude that this is a common law of development. Also, there are some historical instances of syllabaries that came about from alphabets, like the Caroline Island script from Micronesia, that was developed from the Roman alphabet introduced by missionaries… The appearance of the Greek alphabet is not, as it is usually dubbed, a "genius feat" of fine tuning, but rather a random outcome of the adaptation of a Semitic script from languages where vowels and prosody are not very relevant to Ancient Greek, where they play a fundamental semantic and metric role." (Llano, 2016, 16).

Modern studies of literacy (Ong 2002) have shown that the transition from orality to alphabetic literacy has similar effects on human cognition regardless of their geographic or religious characteristics and culture. These studies however rely on a notion of phonetisation that was developed initially by the Greeks who owe their cultural specificity to their unparalleled reflection on the powers of phonetisation. Manuel Llano, like Ong and Havelock before him, celebrates the development of philosophy and Greek literacy and is a champion of the powers of phonetisation. Like many scholars and historians of literacy he thinks one can have one's letters and eat them too: "However it must be acknowledged that it is only through writing that script frees the mind from the mnemonic work and in that sense enables speculation beyond the tight restraints of the tradition. In this sense, using the conceptual pair of an open and a closed society, first enunciated by Bergson and popularized by

Popper, we can say that writing represents an important step towards the opening up of a society, while, almost paradoxically, also being used as a social yoke." (Llano, 2016, 12).

Llano's quip in the final sentence, *'Almost paradoxically',* is written without any further justification of the values it espouses. The author only ventures as far as to indicate that our cherished values are premised upon the material invention of a very particular alphabetic code but does not go as far as to question the things that this code has brought with it, and the means by which this was accomplished. By what means does one attribute value to a material technology as if it were an objectively separate technology from the things that brought it about, the way it is used, the things it causes, and the mystifications attached to it?

The original intention of writing was legalistic and administrative, thereby related directly to state craft and domination. Yet amongst the Greeks it gradually acquires epistemological and spiritual meaning in the form of a code to read the cosmos. The semiotic interpretation of language, a natural development of the phoneticisation of human speech undertaken by Greek culture is still today the way in which we understand the meaning of language and writing. It is necessary to reflect on what made this possible and the ethical consequences of such a transformation.

Alphabetisation creates the illusion (without any empirical bases in historical fact) for modern apologists for 'Western Culture' of their cultural uniqueness and superiority. The algorithmic nature of the phonetic alphabet generates the belief that it contains its origin within itself and due to its infinite power of literalisation and translation of other languages it can claim to understand and absorb them all. Therefore, in order to gain a less ideological perspective regarding the cultural benefits of philosophy and its meaning it is necessary to dispense with the fetish of phoneticism and along with it the idealisation of ancient Greek culture as an alleged origin or reference point for our contemporary needs. If the study of antiquity is undertaken for anything other than historical curiosity, it should be motivated by the desire to untangle contemporary life from the myths and illusions we have inherited from it.

# The Cosmic Element

Over a century of reflection on the emergence of literacy in antiquity has shown beyond doubt that we owe the development of Greek philosophy to the material technology of alphabetisation – a thesis reaffirmed recently by Manuel Llano (2016) in a brilliant dissertation discussed above. In a process beginning with Heraclitus and ending in Plato, we see clearly how language becomes a totality and a system of knowledge by being broken into elements. Philosophy owes its specificity coherence and consistency to this conceptual matrix. In Heraclitus's thought the identification of the cosmos with a Grammar emerges for the first time. Heraclitus conceives of a language constructed by elements that organise and control it, serves as a common measure (the economic element should be emphasised) and can be deciphered by a philosopher/scribe whose wisdom is a uniquely grammatological one (Lebedev, 2014).

Unlike the Milesians (such as Anaximander, and Anaxagoras), Heraclitus did not provide aetiological explanations of different natural phenomena in his philosophy. According to Andrei Lebedev, Heraclitus " was interested only in the pattern of the 'single way of administration of all things, the divine law of measure and harmony of the opposites that permeates all spheres of being –from the heavenly bodies to the human practice… natural processes are not driven by blind mechanical force (as in Anaximander), but are directed by the divine cosmic mind and follow a providential plan" (Lebedev 2014, 236).

The cosmic plan Heraclitus mentions is not only analogous to a Grammar, but the art of Grammar is an example that proves the universe is organised according to a rational order, that it is a *cosmos* made by *logos*. Therefore, ancient commentators could attribute to Heraclitus the following saying:

"Syllables: voiced and unvoiced /letters/, matching conflicting, consonant dissonant, from all /elements/ one, from one all" (Lebedev, 2014.).

This means that for Heraclitus the Logos of the universe is to be read according to the method we read a Grammar. The fundamental elements, the letters, are opposites that are reconciled through syllables to form a unity of opposites in the form of a Logos. Lebedev affirms that the analogy, whilst not being strictly materialistic, is a construction hat is se in motion for the sake of practical purposes of oreder

"In Heraclitus the grammatical logos/syllables/letters analogy, strictly speaking, is not a physical, but epistemological and logical-mereological theory inherently connected with his monistic theological thesis of the identity of all opposites. Our reconstruction of the grammatical analogy in Heraclitus in a sense rehabilitates the theological interpretation of Heraclitus' logos by the Stoics. According to Heraclitus, the universal Logos (Cosmos) is the integral whole of all individual names, syllables, letters (the four elements, animals etc.), identical with the pantheistic god. However, there is one significant semasiological difference between the Stoic and the Heraclitean usage of the word: logos in Heraclitus never means 'reason' in the sense of (mental) faculty of reasoning, in his epistemology it retains the original meaning of 'word' or meaningful speech that can be 'heard' and interpreted." (Lebedev, 2014, 245).

The originator of the cosmic idea of language was Heraclitus. The idea that Logos indicates speech insofar as it is built of elements comes to the fore in Plato's adoption of the term 'element'. Lebedev shows how "Simplicius has preserved the evidence of Eudemus stating that Plato was the first who distinguished in physics "elementary principles" from other principles and assigned to such principles the name of Stoicheia" (Lebedev, 2014, 251). It is true that up to Plato's time there were two words for 'element': *gramma* and *stoicheion* (Ryle, 1960) Yet against other scholars like Burkert (1972) who claim that Plato borrowed from geometry to devise an innovative theory regarding letters, we can affirm with Lebedev that there is sufficient evidence to show that the difference between the two terms is not an indication that they have different meaning. Rather, Plato wished to further emphasise what was already a common association for Greek philosophy between letters and numbers as fundamental indivisibles.

Eric Havelock has famously documented how Plato's philosophy was only made possible due to the spread of alphabetic literacy and that the philosopher's own reflections on the meaning of words and names, origin and copy, reality and idea, are his attempt to come to terms with this cultural phenomenon (Havelock 1963). As is often the case, Ivan Illich articulates this cultural process in the most vivd terms: "Plato's was the time of great change from instruction in elevated rhythmic public speech to the predominance of prose speech. What formerly could only be recited or sung, can now be copied, one copy serving as the source for another. The scroll can freeze "materials" for a teacher. It is not the speech but the language of the past that can be made present. Plato heard the Pythagoreans and Socrates. He does not claim to have dictation from them, but he does boast about his faculty of recollection. He is not a traitor like Hippias, who disclosed the orally transmitted secret teachings of Pythagoras. He is already a writer – however anachronistic that may sound. His dialogues are literary prose. He created the model- never surpassed- of the written dialogue that imitates speech (Illich and Sanders, 1988, 23).

But whilst Plato could still rely on myths to describe the origin of science, seeking to find a balance between two forms of memory and culture (oral and written, natural memory and artificial objective technique), by Aristotle's time letters and writing are naturalised as part of human speech and the stage is set for the metaphysical ideology of literacy that has dominated our history and politics.

Philosophy emerges as a result of the systematisation of language. Building on Lebedev's analysis above we see that the alphabet served as a more than merely an analogy for the structure of the cosmos in Ancient Greek philosophy. The systematisation of language creates a division between speaking and knowing in such a way as to allow for self-referential speech. James Porter concurs that the plausibility of a notion of logos that governs and makes knowledge possible "became available only in the wake of a concept of language as a system, or if one prefers, with the concept of *logos* as such… It was the way in which the metalingual function learned to express itself for the first time, and it was through rhetoric, especially in its more theoretical dimensions, that language users became self-conscious language users, far more so than they did through any exposure to poetry" (Porter 2010, 513).

This is worth considering in light of another saying attributed to Heraclitus: *ethos antrhopoi daimon* (Heraclitus, Diels fragment 19). If we follow Agamben's philology, traditional interpretations argue that this is meant to say that for human beings, character (ethos) is destiny. The word Ethos is not so problematic (the origin of our word for Ethics) and means the dwelling place and proper habit of something. The difference from traditional interpretations emerges in relation to the meaning of *daimon*. Agamben argues that it derives from the verb 'daiomai' which means division or laceration, the actual meaning of the phrase is "*For man, ethos, the dwelling in the self that is most proper and habitual to him, is what lacerates and divides, the principle of a place of fracture' and asks why man is such that to be himself he must divide himself?"* (Agamben, 2000b, 118).

From this perspective, it is not so much the history of the invention of the alphabet as such that interests us but more the fact that given that we know its historical specificity and cultural particularity, what does this entail for our understanding of the nature of language? This requires a philosophical rather than a historical analysis. It is necessary to question the presuppositions behind the reason why, starting with the Greeks, a technique of domination eventually comes to be considered as the defining feature of human life and gives birth to science and Grammar. It is necessary to question the idea that language and knowledge are somehow naturally related and inseparable. How is it that '*homo sapiens* originally

develops as *homo sapiens loquens'?*(Agamben, 2018c). How is it, that is, that human beings become human not only insofar as they speak but insofar as they also know that they speak?

I have shown above how this division between speech and knowledge is a result of the externalisation of language through 'capturing' speech in letters. How exactly does this capture of human speech in letters impact the conception of life that is prevalent in our culture? This needs to be examined through the divisions Aristotle makes when he articulates life and language according to a metaphysical schema. Aristotle draws a relation between 'nutritive' life as a generic substance common to all living beings and the way in which he naturalises the alphabet as 'elements of the voice' These two elements of his philosophy lead to the politicisation of language and life that goes by the name of Ontology. It is the nature of this ontological apparatus that I now turn to.

# Chapter 3

## Aristotle's Ontological Apparatus

As we saw in the second chapter, philosophical culture is dependent on a theory of language understood as the articulation in speech of indivisible elements or letters. If we are able to understand the role that alphabetic writing has had on the development of philosophy in Greece, it is not surprising that Western reflections on language consist almost entirely of theories of signification. Once we recognise that Logos becomes an operative cosmic principle or order as a result of alphabetisation we see why for Western philosophy, language is almost always interpreted as system of signs, and linguistics is essentially a semiotics : "*Both gramma and phone in fact belong to the Greek metaphysical project, which, defining "Grammar" as the reflection on language and conceiving of the phone; as semantike (that is, as the sign of a "writing in the soul") thought of language from the outset from the point of view of the "letter*." – (Agamben, 1993, 156). Metaphysics, from Heraclitus to Derrida is the assumption that Being and Language are intertwined, that philosophy is essentially Ontology: onto-logy- being insofar as it can be said. In modernity, Logos could only become understood as a cognitive epistemological method because it was first a cosmic principle; Cognitive Epistemology is derivative of and marks an internalisation or incarnation of Ontology that is as old as Ontology itself.

In the following chapters we will see how Western literary culture is dependent on the assumption that knowledge of the world consists in developing the cognitive and ethical possibilities inherent in the theory of language as a system of signs. In Agamben's reconstruction of the history of philosophy, the way that language operates in Western philosophy is through the construction of a negativity or emptiness within being which becomes the hidden presupposition of signification. By creating, through grammar, a *lingua nullius* and epistemological *tabula rasa,* language *"presupposes something non-linguistic, and this something unrelated is presupposed, however, by giving it a name*" (Agamben, 2018b, 3). As I demonstrate in following chapters, this negativity will turn out to be the gap that alphabetisation creates between speech and thought. Human speech, which precedes the written word, is from Plato to Deconstruction, always interpreted, backwards as it were, on the basis of a culturally specific manifestation of alphabetic writing. If we are to make steps towards an experience of language

that goes beyond the alphabetic/semiotic one, we need to call into question the entire theory of signification based on that technology that underpins our culture.

As this chapter demonstrates, this theory of signification is developed in a crucial way in Aristotle's construction of philosophy, which gradually came to be called Ontology. Aristotle never used the term 'Ontology'. In the *Metaphysics* he only discusses what he calls 'prote Philosophia', or First Philosophy (Aristotle, 1984). But the way in which he develops his thought shows that his main concern is Being as a whole and insofar as it can be said. This correlation between being and language is the foundation of the discipline or science we now refer to as Ontology (See Heidegger, 1962, Werner Marx, 2012, Agamben, 2018b).

Aristotle formalises philosophy into an Ontology by determining that 'being' is something that can be said. He thereby correlates the meaning of things with the meaning of words. But, insofar as a thing is explicated through its name it becomes at once the thing that is also presupposed by the name. Being becomes the primary cause of entities as a presupposition or foundation upon which all other aspects of an entity (or word) rest. Thus, he presupposes the very thing that he wishes to explain. The same tradition that posits the relation between being and world in the form of the presupposition of alphabetisation posits that the human being is an animal that has a language that operates in this way. But if language is Ontology, then language also determines how human beings have and create a world, so a shift away from such a conception requires a change in the relationship between human beings and language, and therefore requires a critique of Ontology: "*to every change in Ontology there corresponds, therefore, not a change in the 'destiny' but in the complex of possibilities that the articulation between language and world has disclosed as 'history' to the living beings of the species Homo Sapiens"(*Agamben, 2017, 1127*).*

Aristotle determined not only the nature of being-insofar- as-it-is-said but also the nature of human being as a living being that is able speak of the world in a particular way. Aristotle implicates human beings in language in such a way that it puts their political and physical existence at stake in the very words they speak. For that reason, reflection on language is always already political and anthropological. Ontology has always been the science that determines the very relation between humankind and language, the science that defines the human living being as *homo sapiens loquendi* a speaking and thinking being: "*Ontology is laden with the historical destiny of the West not because an inexplicable and magical power belongs to being but just the contrary, because Ontology is the*

*originary place of the historical articulation between language and world, which preserves itself in the memory of anthropogenesis, of the moment when that articulation was produced.*" (Agamben, 2017, 1127).

If linguistics knows language only as a split system of signification, this is primarily due to the fact that Aristotle's Ontology begins with a division that is simultaneously an articulation: "*what is decisive that in the tradition of Western philosophy, being, like, life, is always interrogated beginning with a division that traverses it*" (Agamben,2017). Being like life, is said in many ways only insofar as it is divided. It is important to discover why semiotics is premised on a splitting of language which ultimately means a splitting of the animal that is said to have language: the human being.In order to do so this chapter focuses on the question why it is that when Aristotle defines philosophy as Ontology-the science of being insofar as it *can* be said- he at the same time defines it as the science of being, insofar as it *must* be said! Why is it that Aristotle, in determining the capacity for articulated speech as the essence of humanity at the same time conceives of this capacity as a command and a duty to 'speak'?

## Ontology – A Deadly Desire

Aristotle is reported to have claimed that 'all men, by nature desire to know'. In the lecture notes that have been handed down by tradition under the heading *'Metaphysics*, Aristotle (1984), attempts to formulate philosophy as a technical science and performs an operation on human pleasure that has had decisive influence on Western philosophy and culture. Aristotle's operation entails that all human beings, insofar as they are recognised as human beings, desire knowledge, and hence, curiously, that knowledge is a form of desire. A dominant image of human being that we have inherited from the classical tradition is that of *homo sapiens*: animals who are capable of knowledge and insofar as they know that they know are capable of self-knowledge. According to Foucault's reading (2013), at the basis of this image, still in force today despite repeated challenges against its dominance, lies the cunning fact that we are also, at bottom, meant to enjoy our own essence as knowers.

Michel Foucault, no stranger to the relationship between knowledge, desire and power in modernity, has analysed the relevant passages from Aristotle's text and provided a commentary that is

illuminating as it is comprehensive. In a lecture on the 9th of December 1970, as part of a lecture series published under the heading '*The Will to Know*" (Foucault, 2013).

Foucault begins his analysis by contextualising his enquiry as part of the broader investigation into the origin of the will to truth and knowledge. In distinction to his more specific and historically oriented genealogies of institutional power, Foucault's analysis of Aristotle's text is more deconstructive and structural. In the early part of the course, Foucault aims to show, bracketing out the institutional and cultural contexts that are investigated in the rest of the course, how internally to Aristotle's construction of philosophy, the will to truth is isolated from other desires and at the expense of other types of knowledge and pleasures. Despite the fact that there is "hardly a philosophy which has not invoked something like a will or desire to know, the love of truth , etc" (Foucault, 2013, 4), it is in Aristotle's Metaphysics, perhaps more than any other classical text, that this formulation is developed so clearly as to become foundational for the way in which philosophy has legitimated itself as an autonomous discipline and as the foundation for all other types of intellectual activity.

Foucault shows that Aristotle's claim entails the following three theses –

1)There is a desire to know that is focused on knowledge
2)This desire is universal and found in all human beings (Foucault says 'men')
3)It is given by nature

Aristotle's intention is clearly polemical. There is no deduction of the proof for this principle because in order to prove it Aristotle relies not on necessity of demonstration but on the use of a rhetorical trope, an enthymeme: an abbreviated syllogism with only one premise, which reasons from the example to the general case, according to Aristotle's own demonstration in his lectures on Rhetoric. Foucault notes that "In saying that man naturally desires to know and that this desire to know is already driven by the impulse towards theoretical happiness, Aristotle rules out the Socratic-Sophistic question: Why do we desire to know?" Aristotle never asks why there is a desire for knowledge, but simply states it as a fact and then goes on to argue from a series of disparate anecdotal examples, such as the intrinsic delight in sensory things, the joy of recollection, or the pleasure that craftsmen take in their work. (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 980a-981b).

We can agree with Foucault when he says that “it is by no means immaterial that the proof that all men desire to know is presented as an enthymeme” (Foucault, 2013,7). In other words, Aristotle’s assertion is rhetorical and therefore serves a specific polemical or ideological function, which is to designate a particular distinction between humans who seek out knowledge and others who do not, namely, animals and those humans who as a result of their impairments cannot properly ‘delight in knowledge for its own sake’. Relying on what is shown according to the behaviour of select human beings, Aristotle presents this idea rhetorically as a common place. Nonetheless, he is at pains to demonstrate what this entails: that philosophy can be established as the highest form of wisdom.

To the contemporary reader of Aristotle, likely submerged in the belly of the ‘knowledge economy’, where knowledge is both the alleged origin and consequence of capitalist production, the claim that one should desire what one is commanded to undertake for fear of starvation is a claim that is difficult to digest, regardless of the intention of the ancient author. From the perspective of my previous analysis, what matters is that in his desire to establish metaphysics as a foundational science, Aristotle attempts to establish the validity of science through a natural (biological) taken for granted human desire. For him, philosophy is not simply a pleasurable entertainment or desire, but a science that interrogates the structure of the world and a necessary activity for anyone who wishes to be able to determine anything about the world in general with certainty. Philosophy is presented as a foundation for scientific inquiry. The painstaking scientific elaboration of philosophy as metaphysics takes place on account of, or through the unjustified assumption, that there is such a thing as a natural, biological need and desire for such a science. A need which is said to distinguish human beings from other animals and human beings amongst themselves.

It is necessary therefore to understand the way in which Aristotle constructs Ontology as a science of being in such a way that impacted the philosophical tradition, from the ancients to Heidegger, and that we still live with. Clarifying the ‘Ontological Apparatus’ that Aristotle constructs will show that this Ontology is not only a philosophical approach to the analysis of the world, but an apparatus that constructs the human as a ‘speaking’ and ‘living’ being that determines the nature of humanity in a very problematic way. The definition of humanity as a speaking being, along with the ethics and politics that conditioned it, are from this perspective a lethal construction in need of urgent revision.

# Being Articulated

Despite the fact that we are used to separating between his 'logical' and linguistic writings, Aristotle's philosophy rests on the fact that Being and Language are intertwined, and that logical categories describe reality only insofar as they are elements of language. For this reason, it is impossible to distinguish logic from Ontology and metaphysics from linguistics in Aristotle's philosophy. Agamben justifies this method of interpretation both philologically and philosophically, which we should read as essentially two sides of the same page. The philological point is crucial as it allows us to dispel the modern and overly epistemological prejudices which confuse a theory of cognition for a theory of being when confronting ancient texts. Agamben argues that the texts handed down to us by tradition are based on a mistaken ordering of Aristotle's thought into distinct topics based on the organization of what were originally lecture notes into a canon:

*"Our classification of Aristotle's works derives from the edition Andronicus of Rhodes produced between 40 and 20 BC. We owe to him both the collection of Aristotle's so-called logical writings in an Organon and the notorious location of 'ta meta ta phusika' (after the physics) of the lectures and notes we today call Metaphysics. Andronicus was convinced that Aristotle was a deliberately systematic thinker and that his edition thus faithfully reflected the author's intention, but we know that he projected onto Aristotle Hellenistic ideas that were totally alien to a classical mind. The modern editions of Aristotle, however philologically updated, unfortunately still mirror Andronicus' erroneous conception. We thus continue to read Aristotle as if he really systematically composed a logical 'organon', treatises on physics, politics, and ethics, and finally, the Metaphysics. It is possible to read Aristotle only starting from the destruction of this canonical articulation of his thought*" (Agamben 2018b, 37).

In other words, the neat separation between the branches of philosophy, still governing academic disciplinary segregation and common conceptions of the different spheres of modern life, needs to be abandoned. This will allow us to see that, for philosophy, what is at stake is being as a whole understood to mean the articulation of the relationship between humans and the world.

Philosophy was from the beginning Ontology. The equation of being and language is the common thread uniting all Greek philosophical thought at least since Heraclitus and is formalised by Aristotle into a complete science. Beginning from the assumption that 'being' is said in many ways, there must

be according to Aristotle a science or method that allows us to grasp amidst all those ways of saying what being really is – this is the science of Ontology. For Aristotle: “One speaks about 'being' *(on)* in many ways, but all-that-is is related *(pros hen)* to a unity and one certain nature *(Physis)* and is not *homonym,* but is related in the same way as everything that is healthy is related to health either in the way that it preserves health or in the way that it produces health or in the way that is a symptom of health or because it is capable of it. And that which is medical is related to medical art: either it is called medical because it possesses it or because it is naturally adapted to it or because it is a function of medical art. And we find other expressions of speech used similar to these examples. So, there are many ways in which one speaks about being but all are related to one principle. One speaks of some as beings because they are *ousiai* [substances] others because they are affections of *ousia,* others because they are a process towards *ousia,* or destructions or privations or qualities of *ousia,* or productive or generative of *ousia,* or of things which are relative to *ousia* or negations of one of these or of substance itself. It is for this reason that one even says of not being that it 'is' not-being.” (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1003 a33-1003 b10).

The division of being is inherent in the very assumption that founds Ontology. As explained in the beginning of the *Metaphysics,* Ontology, from its very first definition already divides being into two: being insofar as it is, and being insofar as other things pertain to it, or in Aristotle’s words: “There is an episteme that contemplates being as being and that which belongs to it per se” (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1003 a21). In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle (1984) attempts to define philosophy as the highest science. He does so by explaining that philosophical investigation has two fundamental objects of analysis: on the one hand principles *(arche*) (being as being) and on the other causes (*aition*) (that which belongs to it) (Metaphysics, 983a-983b). Aristotle’s most significant division of Ontology is to define being in seemingly contradictory way as both a foundation (*arche*) and a cause (*aition*). This is why in Aristotle the nature of a thing is its being both a *hypokeimenon* (substance and subject) and a *to ti en einai* (that which it was to be) (Metaphysics, Zeta1028b-c). Being – *ousia* - is divided into a pure founding principle that serves as a silent presupposition of all predications and simultaneously into something that introduces time and movement into things by causing them to be - the ambiguity of these terms is encapsulated in the two definitions of the word being (ousia), which renders fundamental Ontology a split and divided apparatus.

To know the nature of an entity or thing one has to first discover the principle that governs it. The arche is generated through abstracting from something all that can be said about it until one is left with a pure being as primary substance: is to separate within being a primary substance from all the

others which rely on it – the primary or first being is the category which floating to the bottom of all others enable them to rest upon it as a foundation. Aristotle calls this foundation a *hypokeimenon* a subject – that which lies underneath. The subject then becomes the foundation or arche upon which other definitions of categories of being rely upon. As Heidegger (1962 and 1998) showed, in Latin, Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* is translated as 'substance', that which is the foundation for other qualities or determinations, and from where modern languages get the term 'subject' as that which, both linguistically and politically, is both the foundation of and yet subjected to something that determines it.

This means that, from the beginning, 'being' is a presupposition of other categories and language says being insofar as it presupposes a foundation. Being can be said insofar as it presupposes itself – language refers to the world insofar as it takes itself as the foundation upon which it says anything at all. This is why to speak is not simply to say something but to say something-of-something – to presuppose a subject upon which something is predicated. According to the principle that in Aristotle Logic and Ontology cannot be separated, predication is not simply a cognitive method for the sake of articulating things but refers to the very structure of being insofar as it can be said at all, therefore to the very structure of language insofar as it can speak of being. To say anything at all means to be able to say something about something: to split language and being into two, with one element serving as the foundation for the other.

But why is that if 'being is said in many ways' it must also be split into a subject and a predicate such that in saying something about something (for example: this book is green), that thing (in this case the book) becomes a foundation upon which predication (green) becomes dependent. Why does signification always take the form of a presupposition?

One possible explanation is linguistic and is said to pertain to the particularities of ancient Greek as an Indo-European language (Benveniste, 1968). In the Ancient Greek of Aristotle's time, like other Indo-European languages, the verb 'to be' had two meanings which are intertwined yet also distinguishable. On the one hand the 'existential' lexical meaning: "God is" means God exists, and on the other hand the logical predicative meaning, the copula – "God is Great". The ambiguity is less obvious in other languages which determine predication without the copula through the use of suffixes and prefixes (Hebrew for example).

Agamben points out that the ambiguity between these two meanings is the source of many confusions that have determined the fate of the reception of Ontology which operates "*as a double machine, set on distinguishing and, at same time, articulating together the two notions into a hierarchy or into a coincidence"* (Agamben, 2017, 1134). The way this linguistic feature figures in our political life is obvious in the way in which that to be a member of a political community one has to simultaneously be the subject upon which that community depends and the subject which is subjected to the authority of that same community. What then is the origin of this linguistic ambiguitiy?

## An Exceptional Ontology

The semantic confusion between meanings of the verb 'to be' stems from a deeper structural and Ontological operation: the influence of alphabetisation on the experience of language. The operation of predication, the very power of alphabetised language, is explained by Aristotle on the basis of an existence of such a thing as a pure being that is both that which enables predication and also in itself nothing but what predication presupposes in order to function. As Agamben explains, the coherence of Aristotle's determination that Ontology is First Philosophy is dependent on the idea that what comes first is that which sinks to the bottom: *The primary ousia is what is said neither on the presupposition of a subject nor in a subject, because it is itself the subject that is pre-sup-posed- as purely existent- as what lies under every predication.*(Agamben, 2017, 1134).

According to the ambiguity of the verb 'to be' as both indicative and predicative, being as substance is not only 1) that which must be presupposed in order for something to be said about something but also 2) that which, insofar as it is presupposed determines what the essence or meaning is of that which is said about it. In Aristotle's *Metaphyiscs* the ambiguity that emerges is that Being is both foundation and cause (*arche* and *aition*) – both a foundation that is abstracted and yet something that determines the predications which are attached to it. The hidden foundation yet nonetheless is set to determine that which it was abstracted from through the mechanism of causality. Agamben's analysis of Aristotle (Agamben, 2017) shows that the two fundamental concepts that generate the possibility of Metaphysics as First Philosophy, and overdetermine the forms of scientific questioning and analysis till today are not opposed but function together as a sort of mechanism or apparatus: there is only causality insofar as there is a first primary foundation, and there is only a foundation insofar as it is that which determines causality.

That is why it is necessary for Aristotle to say that in order to discover the nature of a thing one must have to discover the causes that determine what it is for that thing to be (Aristotle, Metaphyiscs, 983a-b).Yet before being able to determine the types of causality that exist, Aristotle has to first explain how it is possible for the primary substance, the *arche,* to be that which makes causality possible (Metaphysics Book Alpha 3.) How is it possible for existence to relate to essence, if by existence we mean something that falls to the bottom and remains presupposed? This is done by the introduction of temporality by splitting being.

In order then to attempt to think the unity of existence and essence, Aristotle introduces into the entity a temporal dimension that transforms the *arche* into a presupposition that existed in the past (Aristotle, 1984, Metaphysics Book Zeta). Primary substance becomes at the same time a prior substance, and foundation is understood as both logically and chronologically prior. This means that Ontology becomes historicised: because to determine the essence of something would mean to determine not only what it is but how it came to be. Following Rudolf Bohem, Agamben concurs that the central question of Aristotle's metaphysics is "by means of what is something predicated as something?" (Agamben, 2017, 1137). For Aristotle, to ask what a thing is means to ask simultaneously "by means of what *was* something predicated as something". The *arche* serves as a determination of essence by serving as its past. To answer the question, 'what is it for something to be?' Aristotle uses the formula *to ti en einai,* which can be translated as "what it was to be", or "being what it was" (Aristotle, Metaphysics 1032a).

Why does Aristotle introduce temporality into Ontology in order to bridge the gap between existence and essence? Why is something said to exist only insofar as it is said to *have* existed? Why is it that even though being can be thought of only insofar as it can be said it is split into an unsayable presupposition that nonetheless determines (causes) the ways in which it is said? Being is split into a presupposition and into that which is said on its basis. But with the use of the phrase 'being as it was", "*Aristotle seeks to think their identity, to articulate together what had been divided: being is what was always presupposed in language and by language. That is to say: existence and identity coincide-or can coincide by means of time"* (Agamben, 2017, 1146)

Werner Marx (borrowing from Heidegger) explains that this may be due to the fact the very notion of truth in Aristotle is ambiguous (Marx, 2012). Truth can mean both correspondence or unveiling of what has been concealed: "There are two basic meanings of *aletheuein* and *aletheia* alive in the

*corpus aristotelicum.* One of them comes close to what we today associate with the meaning of Truth. In *De Interpretatione* Aristotle implies that Truth is bringing the experiences of the soul into correspondence with the things. It was this concept of Truth that gained entrance into the *Book Of Definitions* by Isaac Israeli and was from there taken over by Thomas of Aquinas. For him Truth is always an *adaequatio intellectus et rei* or a *correspondentia,* or a *convenientia* between the thought (as expressed in a judgment) and the thing. The same meaning underlies all modern epistemology. There is, however, an older meaning of *aletheia* alive in Aristotle's works. In Presocratic tradition, *a-letheia* seems to have implied a state of manifestedness in which *Lethe* has been overcome, a state of un- concealedness; and *aletheuein* correspondingly meant: to un-conceal, to take out of the state of *Lethe." (*Marx, 2012, 16).

Perhaps there is not such a difference between these two notions as Heidegger emphasised, but rather a solidarity that is the consequence of the terms within which Ontology is defined. Werner Marx argued that with the notion of *aletheia* "The un-concealing effort on the part of man presupposes in a sense the state of unconcealedness within which this activity can act: it presupposes that there is something that can be gathered as *aletheia"* (Werner Marx, 2012, 81) But we should add that that which can be gathered can only maintain a relationship with what determines it through articulating it as already explained and understood through predication, that is, through correspondence. In any case, any concept of truth that Aristotle is working with is subordinate to the general determination that being must be said in order to be. Truth cannot be otherwise than a consequence of the structure of language. If the distinction between truth as unconcelament and truth as predication is the foundation of what Heidegger terms the 'Ontological difference', (the difference between Being and beings) then their coherence as two poles of the same Ontological structure in Aristotle would call into question the validity of Heidegger's claim to have overcome metaphysics. Rather, it exposes Heidegger as very loyal to the tradition he claims to critique. These issues will be developed further in Chapter 6. In the remainder of this chapter I will explain how Aristotle develops his theory of signification and the way in which it determines the Ontological apparatus he constructs.

# The Grammatisation of the Living Being

For Aristotle, human life must be conceptualized in such a way as to make human beings capable of developing an Ontological investigation (Metaphysics 980a-b and Foucault,2013). The development of first philosophy as a science of being is at the same time the determination of the human being as the one capable of such a science. Ontology is possible only if language can be said to consist of the essence of the human. Ontology therefore is not simply a method of inquiry into the fundamental principles of beings for the sake of elucidation and understanding, it is at the same time a mechanism which determines the nature of human beings in regard to their animality and their language. Aristotle begins his investigation with the claim that being can be said in many ways. The questions therefore must be asked, who is the one carrying out the saying of being in so many ways? And who is the being that is capable of saying it in this way? And in what way does this being have to live and speak in order for such a saying to be possible?

Aristotle attempts to show how the human voice is grammaticized so that the one who speaks coincides with to the one who is spoken about by splitting himself, yet somehow maintaining a relation between both elements. As Agamben shows repeatedly (Agamben 2018b), Aristotle argues that this relation is possible through what he terms 'articulation': the incarnation of letters into the human voice. By rejecting Plato's explanation about the self-referentiality of language in and of itself (the very basis for Plato's theory of ideas) Aristotle instead chooses to incorporate language into the human organism by attempting to find a material cause for it. This explains the function of letters in his theory of signification which turns language into something considered as always already written.

Aristotle grounds his theory of signification within the natural living being. Agamben shows how this occurs by discussing a series of definitions made by Aristotle's definitions, in which the latter carefully distinguishes signifying from non-signifying sound, language from voice, and ultimately, human from animal. How is it possible then to distinguish mere voices or sounds made by the mouth from 'language' as such, from what is here already thought of as signifying sound? Aristotle's answer, Agamben claims, is through letters, the very *stoicheia*, or elements that in the previous chapter were shown to be the the fundamental indivisible parts of the Greek language in the form of an alphabet.

The fact that the semiotic interpretation of language owes its origin to alphabetic writing is exemplified by the way in which Aristotle attempts to explain how it is that a living being can make sounds that have meaning; how is it possible that human speech signifies such that the living being is thought of always as a speaking being. In his philosophy, Aristotle explains the signifying capacity of language as a consequence of the fact that letters reside within the human voice. In order for alphabetic letters to become phonetic they must somehow be said to exist within the body of the human being. The place where they must reside is for Aristotle, the human voice. Time and time again Aristotle says that letters are not "the voice" but rather elements 'in the voice'. I will demonstrate this below through Agamben's analysis of these passages.

In Aristotle's "On the Soul" we read that: "*As we have said, not every sound made by a living creature is a voice (for one can make a sound even with the tongue, or as in coughing), but that which even causes the impact, must have a soul, and use some imagination. For the voice is signifying sound*" (Aristotle, in Agamben, 2018b, 17).

Aristotle makes the letters (*grammata*) the elements 'in the voice' that 'render it signifying and comprehensible". In *Poetics,* Aristotle clearly states that 'a letter (*stoicheion*) is an indivisible voice, not any voice, but one through which a voice becomes intelligible." (Aristotle in, Agamben, 2018b 16-18).

Aristotle continues to explain his point by making a fundamental distinction that will define for him the essence of a human being compared to other 'animals': "Animals utter indivisible voices but none that I should call a letter. The parts of the intelligible voice are the vowel, the semi-vowel, and the mute." (Aristotle, in Agamben Ibid.). Agamben provides two further definitions. One taken from *Metaphysics*: "The elements (stoicheia) of the voice are that of which the voice is composed and the ultimate parts into which it is divisible", and the other from *Problems:* "Humans produce many letters (grammata) but other living creatures no letters, or, at most, two or three consonants. Consonants combined with vowels produce discourse. Logos is signifying something not by the voice but by certain affections of it. And the letters are affections of the voice." (Agamben, Ibid). Here we encounter most clearly the definition of Logos as signifying sound. But a signifying sound that is said to exist only in the human voice as a result of the letters that reside there. For Aristotle, Logos is the incarnation of the alphabet.

Indeed, in his text *On the Parts of Animals*, not coincidentally a Zoological study, Aristotle goes so far as to suggest that it is human anatomy itself that enables letters to gain their power: "Language, through the voice, is composed of letters; and if the lips were not supple, or if the tongue were other than it is, the greater parts of letters could not possible be pronounced, since some them result from an impact of the tongue and a closing of the lips" (Aristotle, in Agamben 2018b, 18).

It is here that Aristotle defines the process through which letters create meaningful sound as an 'articulation' - an established technical term in modern linguistics (Ladefoged and Maddison 1996). It is articulation which creates Logos and separates it from other types of voice and sound: "Voice differs from sound and language (*Logos*) from both…Language (*Logos*) is the articulation of the voice by means of the tongue. Now vowel sounds are produced by the voice and larynx; consonantal sounds by the tongue and the lips. And these produce language". (Aristotle, in Agamben, Ibid.).

*Logos* – the articulation produced by the letters in the voice – becomes in Aristotle a zoological phenomenon. This is a process for which Aristotle also uses the term hermeneutics, and hence founds the possibility of it as a science. A science based on the analysis of that which "*is unfolded between what is in the voice, the letters, the affections of the soul, and things; but the decisive function – that which makes the voice capable of signifying – rests precisely with the letters; the first and ultimate hermeneut is the Gramma*" (Agamben, 2018b,18).

## The Name of Being

The role that letters play in the theory of signification is exactly the same as the role of the first substance of Ontology. The letters show themselves in the human voice only insofar as they already belong to a past - as an interpretation of the voice, the letters capture the voice by removing it and enthrone themselves as the first foundation.

Greek philosophy of language, in both Plato and Aristotle, distinguishes within language the plane of names from the plane of discourse. The name signifies pure existence, that which calls a thing into being, the foundation of discourse (Backer, 2010). Whilst the predications of being are designated by

proper nouns, the first essence or substance, is, as we saw designated by a 'shifter' the demonstrative pronouns "this" or "that" being. In Linguistics since Aristotle, the status of names along with deictic pronouns are the pure names which in relation to other names and terms hold the same relation that the first substance does to other qualities (Gaskin, 2001). Insofar as something 'is' indicatively, it can be separated from its other qualities. This parallels the way that a human being is named, the proper name and the indicative pronoun are synonymous – John is not anything specific that John 'is' but the term that is used as a foundation for all other definitions – tall, strong, white etc. – "*the problem of being-the supreme metaphysical problem- emerges from the very beginning as inseparable from the problem of the significance of the demonstrative pronoun, and for this reason it is always already connected with the field of indication*" (Agamben, 2006, 18).

This is why linguistics, identifying names with indicative pronouns preoccupies with the seemingly unresolvable problem of 'what is the name of a name'? The debates (from Aristotle to Kripke) can be summarised by stating one simple problem: how can language, which names everything, name itself? (Livingston, 2012) To name language we must already be in language, and hence cannot explain its power. Therefore, there must be the presupposition of an unnameable, a non-linguistic foundation which enables linguistic predication. In order to establish a meta-language, one must either revert to an infinite regress or rely on an unnameable foundation. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this is expressed in modernity through the theme of self-reference.

In terms of Aristotle's Ontology, Agamben summarises the consequences of this issue: "*It is precisely by means of the anonymity and insubstantiality of linguistic Being that philosophy was able to conceive of something like pure existence, that is, a singularity, without real properties. If the linguistic term was not anonymous, if we already had names for the name, we would already encounter things with their real properties; there would never be a point at which our power of naming (or of the attribution of properties) would come to a halt. This stopping point cannot be constituted by a non-linguistic being, since language can name everything, its naming power knows no limits (the non-linguistic, in this sense, is nothing other than a presupposition of language)* (Agamben, 2000, 71).

As I discussed before, when Aristotle asks a question like, 'what is a house?' the articulation of the causes that make up the house can only be said because "there is present what was the being of the house". Why is the only way to explain why something that is must always have been, is to say that it cannot be said? Subordinating the question of truth to the very linguistic nature of the question,

Agamben shows how the only way in which that which is named recedes into a presupposition of that name is due to the very nature of language; "*the scission of being into essence and existence and the introduction of time into being are the work of language".* Temporality is a function of linguistic signification which can only speak of something insofar as it speaks of it as already past: *"by abstracting itself from predication, the singular being recedes into a past like the sub-jectum of the presupposition of which every discourse is founded"* (Agamben, 2017,1142). In order to function, language must introduce a temporal split into being and therefore presuppose itself as an inaccessible origin. What it means for anything to 'be' is therefore to exclude from itself its origin as a presupposition. For the world to exist in language it must already be thought to exist as unspeakable or concealed in a distant past that determines its capacity to be spoken about.

The ambiguity between the predicative and indicative meanings of the verb 'to be' reveals the fundamental presuppositional structure of alphabetic language. Transforming the *arche* into a presupposition, Ontology gives a name to being as that which is not-yet linguistic and yet conditions every act of language. For Aristotle, the pure being names this presupposition as a '*singular and impredicable existence that must be at once excluded and captured in the apparatus. The 'it was' of the tie en einai (what it was to be) is, in this sense, a more archaic past that every verbal past tense, because it refers to the originary structure of the event of language. In the name (in particular the proper name, and every name is originally a proper name, being is always already presupposed by language to language)* (Agamben, 2017, 1143). For the Aristotelian Ontological apparatus pure being serves as its own presupposition – being has to function as a foundation that remains unnameable. In other words, for Aristotle there is no name for being but being is 'the name'.

In Aristotle, letters serve a dual function. They are at once elements and signs. He separates human language from animal language by incorporating letters into the voice. And yet signification is set to work he says because "*What is in the voice is the sign of affections in the soul; what is written is the sign of what is in the voice. And just as letters are not the same for all men, so it is with voices. But that of which they are signs, that is, affections in the soul, are the same for all; and the things of which the affections are semblances are also the same for all men*" (Aristotle, in Agamben, 2018b., 37). Letters at once signify concepts and at the same time are the foundation upon which the human voice is separated from animal voice. Agamben confirms our analysis of the centrality of letters which act as a kind of self-index or causa-sui that make 'culture', insofar as it is based on signifying speech, possible. From Aristotle we inherit the seemingly obvious point that

"*animal voice and human language are distinct, but coincide locally in man, in the sense that language is produced through an 'articulation' of the voice, which is nothing else than the inscription of letters (grammata) in it, whereby letters are entrusted the privileged status of being, at the same time signs and elements(stoicheia) of the voice"* (Agamben, 2018b, 18).

The problem of the location of letters in the voice is the same as the problem of the isolation of pure being. Insofar as the animal voice must be taken away in order to serve as a foundation for articulate speech, it serves as a removed foundation that cannot be spoken of except through indication. It is inarticulate and inarticulable. In the same way, the removal of the pure first being from the series of predications and causes that make up an entity becomes the unspeakable foundation for the chain of significations. Pure being and Letters are one and the same: "*the dimension of the meaning of being is thus a dimension-limit-of signification, the point at which it passes into indication*" (Agamben, 2006,18).

Therefore the always already writable nature of language is commensurate with the split between the two planes of language that haunts Western linguistics.: *"The Aristotelian scission of ousia(which as first essence, coincides with the pronoun and with the plane of demonstration, and as a second essence with the common noun and with signification) constitutes the original nucleus of a fracture in the plane of language between showing and saying, indication and signification. This fracture traverses the whole history of metaphysics, and without it, the Ontological problem itself cannot be formulated. Every Ontology (every metaphysics, but also every science that moves, whether consciously or not, in the field of metaphysics, presupposes the difference between indicating and signifying, and is defined, precisely as situated at the very limit between these two acts*" (Agamben, Ibid,).

The initial result of our investigation of Aristotle's Ontology shows that when writing in letters is taken as the foundation of living speech then, at the same time, language is split into two planes that can only be reconciled by the myth of the tongue as the biological location of letters. The myth of a pure being that recedes as a presupposition for predication in language is the same as the myth of letters as both foundation and articulation of the human voice. The possibility of knowledge as metaphysics -that being can be said- is inseparable from a notion of language that is considered to be always already written.

If for Aristotle being is a presupposition, this is not only due to semantic ambiguity of Greek (this ambiguity itself needs to be explained), but a result of the need to find a foundation upon which

signification must rest; the need to bring to a halt the naming power of language. This is the function of temporality in the Ontological apparatus which splits being into a past and a present of discourse, precisely the role that the letters play in signification. For Aristotle, the letters serve as their own foundation. They are the elements of the voice and the ultimate foundation of the voice, and yet at the same time function as a sign of the voice, as that which the voice uses to represent ideas. The letters are like the first substance, that which both enables things to be said and yet also claims to represent them. They are an irreducible element which must have always existed in the voice in order for it to signify. The letter is in the voice only insofar as it 'was' in the voice.

Aristotle famously begins his metaphysics with the declaration that "All men by nature desire to know". Yet this desire is only demonstrated through the inscription of letters in the voice. This inscription is Aristotle's attempt to find a way to unite the two planes of language within the act of speaking – language is considered to be biologically always already writable because the human being defined as a speaking animal must find a foundation for knowledge within itself. The idea of a physical location of letters in the voice or the tongue deserves to join other great philosophical myths in the dustbin of history. Aristotle attempts to suture the linguistic division created by alphabetic notation by naturalising language, now understood as writing, within the body of human beings. It isn't surprising then that this tactic is adopted even by a decidedly un-Aristotelian thinker like Descartes (1985) who attempted to mitigate the consequences of his dualism of mind and matter by identifying the pineal gland as the material location of thinking. In the following section I will discuss how this naturalistic myth is still in operation within contemporary language pedagogy (not to mention psychiatry) and shapes our understanding of the place, origin and meaning of language.

## What's in the Voice?

In "*What is Philosophy?*" (Agamben, 2018b), in a section that contains an elaboration of key themes in his thought, Agamben claims that in Western philosophy an interpretation of language always presupposes an interpretation of the voice, and therefore any interpretation of language always presupposes some relation to the living human being. From Aristotle to modern linguistics, human language is constructed through an operation on the animal voice, which inscribed in it the

letters as elements. This is based on an illusion that the voice can be fully captured or transcribed (Agamben, 2018b, 18-28).

The operation of transcribing letters in the voice is so self-evident to us also due to the fact that every modern school child learns to 'speak' by being taught to articulate sounds by matching written representations to anatomical locations in the mouth and tongue. Grammar, which is now taught in primary schools, has been, and to a certain extent still is, the foundational discipline of knowledge. Of course, the ubiquitousness of Grammar as the officially sanctioned representation of language has immense pedagogical and hence political significance for the ability to develop universal Grammars, determine historical similarities between Grammars or for the capacity to transform dead or oral languages into written teachable Grammars. This determines in many ways the capacity for cross-cultural communication, translation and understanding. For this reason, it was crucial to examine very carefully the method by which Aristotle devises the apparatus of articulation which ensures that the voice always already expresses letters and that language, understood as made of phonetic letters, therefore finds its origin and stability within the human voice.

Language education is often based on the viability of the linguistic science called 'phonetics', which deals with parts of speech. It is not necessary for our argument to provide a detailed history of phonetics, which emerged in ancient India and Greece and into modernity with the development of sound recording technology. It is worth mentioning however that the modern system of phonetic notation, known as 'visible speech' was developed in the nineteenth century by the American Alexander Melville Bell, the father of Alexander Graham the 'inventor' of the telephone. It is no coincidence that "visible speech" was initially thought to be helpful particularly to aid deaf people to learn how to write and speak more clearly – that is, an invention of technology that compensates for an absence of sound. (Margret A. Winzer, 1993).

The technological and pedagogical influence of Phonetics is immense, yet it is important to point out the obvious: phonetics is dependent for its coherence on the axiom of an 'articulated' voice – it begins with the existence of the alphabet and then proceeds to search within the voice for ways to reproduce what is taken for granted as a written system of notation. But of course, as has already been pointed out by Saussure, and subsequently confirmed by phonetic experimentation, there is no neat fix between sound and notation. Agamben, citing an experiment undertaken by linguist Paul Menzerath, concludes: "*in the act of speech, sounds do not follow each other, but become so intimately entangled and bound*

*to each other that the unities we assume ourselves to be able to distinguish both at the morphological and phonetic levels actually constitute a perfectly continuous flux*."(Agamben, 2018b,21). What is more, we know that any attempt to successfully articulate letters and sounds according to the exact instruction of a phonetic anatomical manual will, if undertaken in the flow of speech, likely result in a difficulty to speak.

The possibility and 'success' of Phonetics proves the centrality of the assumption of the autonomy of notated language from the human speech it aims to represent – living speech must be presumed to be captured in notation in order for their articulation to be possible. This occurs even more acutely in the science of Phonology, which claiming to abandon materialism, cannot avoid the pitfalls of idealism (See the discussion in Agamben 2018b, 19-22). Against the presumption of writability, Phonology tries to isolate within spoken language a series of phonemes: bare indivisible and non-vocalisable differentials. Phonology seeks to enthrone these phonemes as 'elements' in place of letters. The problem facing Phonetics was the articulation of voice through letters is now internalised within the mind through a distinction between indivisible semiotic elements and actual semantic speech. The 'letters' are cognitivised and bundled into basic units of inaudible speech, despite the fact that in actuality there is no explanation for the connection between the mental units and the meaning of words. Phonology is but an internalisation of Phonetics with the actual voice now twice removed. The failure of contemporary linguistic sciences rests in its debt to the Aristotelian Ontology of articulation it is dependent on.

## Aristotle's Condemnation

The impact of writing on ancient Greek politics has been described in various histories of Greek politics and is sufficiently well known not to require detailed elaboration (See Chapter 1 along with the studies by Dettienne, 1999 and Vernant,2006). Nonetheless a few points need to be made to understand the novelty of Aristotle's approach when he develops Ontology.

Jennifer Wise reminds us of the relationship between theatre and politics as part of the development of written laws under the reforms of Cliesthenes in 508 BC (Wise, 2000). The rise of written law along with the popularisation of the court process corresponded to the development of the dramatic theatre.

The written law had the function of encouraging forensic (at least in language) and scrutinisable forms of evidence and testimony, in which all members of the legal process, including the judge who once remained outside it, were beholden to abstract rules and procedures. The written law demanded that the process conformed to the logical restrictions imposed by written language, which demands sequential reasoning, syllogistic truth and personal responsibility rather than divine attribution of motives and deeds.

When names begin to be written administratively they have two political functions:

1)As part of administration, they have the function of breaking up traditional filial or tribal descriptions and loyalties and creating an equality first in writing and then in a new social order of individual names of what are now citizens. If previously the designation 'Boutad" referred to the descendants of a noble Boutes, it now becomes "the name of any person, however humble, who resided in the deme of that name" (Ostwald, 1986, 20). From now on names are not listed *patronymically* but, *demonymically* – according to the 'deme' where a person resided.

2) As part of the same reforms, Cliesthenes institutes the Ostraka: the process of banishment or exile of a citizen, whose name was etched on a clay piece (the *ostrakon*, from where we get the word for 'ostracism'). The process was anonymous and hence citizens were not asked to defend their decisions. What is crucial is that the person exiled was never charged and therefore could not defend themselves. They were banished without redress and faced a death penalty if they ever returned.

In the same way as the listing of names entailed a political 'liberation' from filial lineage in favour of citizenship as a criterion for belonging, the writing of names of characters in theatre 'liberates' names from the sanction of orality and their containment in the mythological narrative of the Muse. The poetic form of speech developed in Athenian tragedy owes its style in many ways to the development of forensic legal speech. Jennifer Wise discusses the interrogation of Orestes in Ayeschelus' Eumenides as an example. (Wise, Ibid.).

And yet at the same time we can see that the institution of political Isonomy, the equality of citizens based on writing, also institutes the political ritual of banishment and ostracism as an optional annual regular function of the 'democratic' order.

However, the impact of written law and theatre on the minds and lives of citizens was considered initially in line with the idea of theatricality or fictional identity. When pronouns appear in writing for the first time in Greece they appear in either legal or theatrical contexts – as fictional masks or identities assumed by people insofar as they enter language as a persona (which is the word for mask in Greek). The first inscriptions of pronouns refer not to authors but to hypothetical identities, in the same way as they do in theatre or literature. Wise (2000) shows how in dramatic texts the inscription of pronouns is unmediated, unmotivated and decontextualized. Pronouns refer neither r to the one speaking or writing, nor are they a quotation from existing speech, and they can be assumed by anyone taking up that role. The speaker distances him or herself from the act of speech and brackets their own biography and somatic life. But this is done as a performance, as a fiction. The iterability and universality of writing brackets time and space to create a fictional space within which it can be articulated according to its own logic, and which speakers are able to assume or exit at will, or according to the demands of ritual and performance.

Writing maintains its authority through the permanence of marks on a surface – the idea of a fixed abstract temporal past is contained in this feature of written signs. The temporality of the written inscription had the characteristics of what we have encountered in Aristotle: "Anything written both comes from the past and positions itself as a kind of promise toward the future" (Wise, 2000, 185) Insofar as something was written, it was attributable to a past authority that was no longer present, but still had to be presupposed in order for the writing to be repeatable. Authority over language presented itself as coming from the past and maintaining its power into an infinite future.

When Aristotle determines writing as biologically part of the human being he at the same time temporalises being. He splits language into a plane of pure signification and a plane of predication. This is similar to the notion of an authorial name and the ways in which it can later be performed or acted out. This temporalisation can perhaps be accounted for historically in terms of the general interpretation of writing by Greek theatrical and legal practice. But whilst in the theatre the name referred to a person as a fictional mask, in Aristotle the foundation becomes anonymous and cannot be said.

As I already pointed out, the Ontological Apparatus that Aristotle devised showed that the possibility of predication functions in the same way as the very possibility of articulating language as meaningful utterances. Ontology is the apparatus that combines articulation of the voice with the predication of pure being. It both places pure being as a foundation for predication and letters as presupposition of

speech. Insofar as being is said it is split into an unsayable *arche* and sayable predications. In line with the split nature of the language through which being is said, pure being, the *arche*, takes the role of a name. The name of being cannot be spoken except through the different predications of being which take that name for granted as a presupposition.

At the same time, letters are inscribed in the voice as the elements that allow the proper articulation of language. In speaking of being, human beings as said to only articulate what is always already present for them in the unheard voice - letters. The letters are the elements of the name of being. Just like pure being of the *arche* they are considered to have always already determined in advance the way being is said and, what amounts to the same thing, the way language is articulated.

It is well known that for Aristotle articulated sound, at once separating man from animals is also what renders politics intelligible. In a passage from *Politics*, Aristotle is unequivocal: *"Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensation of pain and pleasure and of signifying the two). But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city*" (Aristotle, in Agamben, 2017, Introduction). The context in which Aristotle grammaticises the human voice is a political one.

The jurisprudential nature of Aristotle's philosophy can be emphasized insofar as the text where the Ontological Apparatus is deployed is named 'The Categories', which is the legal term for accusation in Greek (Aristotle, 1984 and Agamben, 2018a). Being is said insofar as it is accused: it must justify itself in accordance with logical analysis, and the entity that enables the predication to take place drops to the bottom as a foundation or authority, that now has no name and like a god is said to have existed forever. Being acquires a sovereign and founding function insofar as it accuses itself and divides itself. The interiorization of letters as foundation therefore brings an end to the theatrical notion of personhood in favour of what could be described as a legalistic accusative structure in which, like in law, the life of the person speaking is put at stake in their own words. To speak of being, I can no longer wear a mask but become identified in my body with the very words I choose to say. Writing and speech are now completely identified within the body of the speaker, and in the gap between them is inserted a letter as a foundation, no longer pure writing or pure orality but rather a 'living letter', which a speaker can no longer rid themselves of every time they speak. In this sense, Ontology begins

as an accusation of the living being by language. Like the annual ostracism, Aristotle banishes the non-grammaticised speaking voice from language by inscribing in it the letters of the alphabet, thereby accusing it by handing down a life sentence.

Without seeking to historically relate the practice of ostracism to Aristotle's strategy (even though Aristotle supported its implementation) we nonetheless can draw an analogy: For Aristotle the virtue of the political community is secured through a double banishment: The banishment of divisive and powerful people as well as the separation from politics of those condemned to private life; slaves, women and children. At the same time the living voice and the living being are banished through the mechanism of the 'articulated voice', which performs the function of a historical and silent *arche*.

The attribution of politics to human beings is then done on the basis of attributing linguistic signification to the living being. Through his linguistic analysis of Aristotle's use of Greek terms (and following on logically from Aristotle's philosophy as a whole) Agamben shows that by 'political' Aristotle means a way of life and speech based on a distinction between articulate speech (Logos) and non-articulate speech (phone). As we already mentioned before, Agamben begins his analysis with the following observation "*The Greeks did not have a single term to express what we understand by the word life. They made use of two semantically and morphologically distinct terms: zoè, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living things (animals, human beings, or gods), and Bios, which signified the form or manner of life proper to an individual or group. In modern languages, in which this opposition gradually disappears from the lexicon (where it is preserved, as in biology and zoology, it no longer indicates a substantial difference), one sole term—whose opacity grows to an extent proportional to the sacralization of its referent—designates the bare common presupposition that it is always possible to isolate in each of the innumerable forms of life"*(Agamben, 2017, Introduction).

Therefore, for Aristotle, the articulation of speech through letters which allows for signification is thought to be a natural biological phenomenon which distinguishes the human animal as a living species. Whereas in fact it is a cultural and historical phenomenon based on the specificity of the Greek alphabet or language, interpreted through the doctrine of the elements that dominates Greek science. At the same time, Aristotle knew that there was a distinction between private natural life of the domestic or economic sphere (*Zoe*) and the political or fully human life that was the life of

the public person or artisan (*Bios*). The question is then why did he attribute language, which is the element of politics and culture to the natural life of the human and not the political one? There seems to be a contradiction in Aristotle's thought when he suggests a) human beings share natural life with all species and yet b) this natural life is the foundation of what distinguishes all human beings from other living creatures as a result of language. This would, if we followed Aristotle's own law on non-contradiction, not make any sense at all and not constitute a problem as it would seem like a fundamental contradiction and hence a misinterpretation of Aristotle's thought.

Rather than a contradiction, this structure is central to Aristotle's way of thinking. Not so much a logical contradiction as an operation and structure of interpretation based on the Ontological apparatus. The correlation between the bare life that founds the polis through its exclusion and the animal voice that does the same is therefore based on a structural mechanism of the inclusive/exclusion that Agamben calls a 'state of exception'. The splitting of life is also the same split that occurs through the correlation of language as a system of signification which is dependent on a distinction between an articulated voice and a non-signifying voice.

As we say in the discussion of articulation above and already quoted earlier on for Agamben the central point is that the question *"In what way does the living being have language?" corresponds exactly to the question "In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?" The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized. In the "politicization" of bare life-the metaphysical task par excellence the humanity of living man is decided. In assuming this task, modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition. The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/ enemy but that of bare life/ political existence, Zoe/ Bios, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion".* (Agamben, 2017, Introduction).

In chapter 1 we saw how life is transformed into 'bare life' to serve as the foundation for politics, and hence also as the foundation for any contemporary discussion about the 'meaning' or 'sanctity' of life and the value of the human being. As has already been made clear, this is a discussion that

cannot be conducted in separation from a discussion of the linguistic nature of human beings and the way in which language allows for a relation to history and the world. Aristotle was able to interpret the alphabet as a natural element of the human voice because he was dependent on the way in which Greek culture had by that time assimilated and developed in its own way the alphabetic script inherited from other cultures through military and commercial exchange. The enormous influence of phonetic alphabet on the development of the science of language in the form of Semiotics and Grammar is the subject of the following chapters.

# Chapter 4

## The Paradoxes of Semiotics

*"Scientific investigation (but also our modern way of thinking generally and indeed the very possibility of the existence of something like 'laws') is based on a principle that was not clearly articulated until the eighteenth century, with the expression principium rationis. Leibniz, who was extremely proud of his discovery, formulated it thus: nihil est sine ratione. Nothing is without reason: this means that nothing in the universe exists whose reason cannot be given, or as the expression of the time had it, nothing exists for which we cannot reddere rationem. To reason means, in fact, to search for and to provide reasons — to name the real by giving to it its reason. Linguistics, as a science, therefore seeks the reason of language, summoning language ad rationem reddendam. In Greek, ratio, or reason, is logos. But logos is also the name that the Greeks gave to language itself. As such, Aristotle's most celebrated definition of man as zôon logon ekhon means both that man is 'the animal who has reason' and 'the animal who has language'. (*Agamben, 2018c*).*

In previous chapters I showed how Ontology is always a semiotics: once language is interpreted as a system, it is always already interpreted as a system of signs and the split governing the ontological apparatus is the same as the split between speaking and writing. This split begins with Heraclitus' construction of Logos as the unity of irreconcilable warring factions, to Plato's distinction between Name and Logos through to modern distinctions between Langue and Parole, Semiotic and Semantic, Diachrony and Synchrony, Sense and Denotation. An interrogation of language must attempt to take into account the origin of this fracture or split and ask "*why are being and language constituted in such a way that originally entails this gap?*" (Agamben,2018,7). The following chapter takes up this question buy examining the legacy of semiotics in modern linguistics. As I will show, the semiotic paradigm taken up by modern linguistics leads contemporary theory to a series of irresolvable paradoxes and dead-ends which cannot be resolved without exposing and overcoming the assumptions of alphabetisation and the science of Grammar built upon it.

# Semiotics is a Prejudice of Literacy

In 1967 Richard Rorty, the American philosopher announced that the philosophical labours of the previous decades, culminating in his own time consisted of a "linguistic turn" in philosophy and proclaimed the inauguration of an era in which "philosophical problems may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use," (Rorty 1967, 3). This view shared by philosophers belonging to both analytic and continental stands of philosophy (a division based simply on different methods of linguistic analysis rather than a suspicion of its importance) dominated philosophical practice in the 20th century and provided it with a coherence and sense of historical ideological vocation.

From the Viennese Logical Positivists, to Saussureian Structuralism and its impact on anthropology and psychoanalysis, to Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Derrida and the naturalism of Chomsky, "reflection on language and its structure has provided both a key methodological resource and an essential thematic dimension, determining or articulating projects and problems, as well as the prospects for their solution, resolution, or transformation" (Livingston, Bell, Cutrofello 2015, Introduction).

The fact that a 'linguistic turn' was heralded as a revolutionary discovery on the 20th century would seem to be partly due to a selective reading of the history of philosophy and a touch of amnesia given the fact that from its inception in Ancient Greece, Western philosophy has been preoccupied with reflection on the existence of language. As we will see in chapter 5, Christianity owes part of its cultural power to the philosophical reflection of language it inherited from Greek and Roman culture. A central aspect of early Christian reflection was the dogma that "in the beginning was the word" – an article of faith that would have been held by many of the philosophers who, apparently miraculously, stumbled upon language in their philosophical journey. In addition, the central philosophical currents of the Twentieth Century knew that their 'discovery' was made possible on the back of an earlier 'linguistic turn', began following the linguistic reformation of Kant's philosophy two centuries earlier, inaugurated by Hamman, Herder and Humboldt, and culminating in Romanticism and historical linguistics.

It is not surprising therefore, that despite the diversity and at times hostility amongst the various linguistic philosophies dominating our epoch, they all share at least one feature: language is always understood as a system of signs governed by rules. Paul Livingston (Livingston, 2012) recently summarised the unquestionable common assumptions of linguistic philosophy, whether structuralist or analytic:

*1) Language as a whole can be understood as a system or structure of signs, words, propositions, sentences or other significant terms.*

*2) The logical, grammatical, or structural interrelations among these terms, as well as their ordinary use in speaking or writing, are wholly or partially constrained by a corpus of intelligible rules or regularities.*

*3) These rules or regularities are describable, and their description can account for the correct or normal use of terms in everyday interlocution.*

*4 ) On the basis of such a description, it is possible to determine the meaning or meaningfulness of terms or combinations of terms used on particular occasions.*

*5) The rules or regularities that thus constrain the use of language are essentially public, intersubjective, and social in character*

Despite the debate about the nature of the regulations, their location or the exact type of referentiality in question, these assumptions are shared by all schools of linguistics and linguistic philosophers (from Austin to Derrida) that utilise language as a tool of cultural analysis. In other words, language is always already a semiotics. What does it mean that language is at bottom a system of signs? That linguistics is always already a semiotic science?

Developing these arguments, Giorgio Agamben has pointed out that, despite relying on a unitary conception of the sign, in addition to the 5 principles we listed in the first section of this chapter, all linguistic philosophies share this particular feature: They divide language itself into two separate planes or entities, the connection between which is always in need of explanation (See Agamben, 2018b) Agamben summarises that indeed, "*since Saussure, this characterisation of language-as-sign has become the foundation of all linguistic inquiry and is accepted as incontestable dogma even by*

*those who take an avowedly critical stance towards his work. As Jakobson wrote, 'modern structuralist thought has clearly established [that] language is a system of signs, and linguistics is part of the science of signs, or Semiotic (Saussure's sémiologie). The ancient definition of the sign — 'aliquid stat pro aliquot' — something stands for something else) has been resurrected and proposed as still valid and productive"... Linguistics could be cast as a science, that is, only by defining its object as a system of signs — a coherent whole made up of entities, each characterised by the indivisible union of two elements, the signifier and the signified (signans and signatum). In other words, the birth of linguistics as a science coincides with the definitive entry of language into a semiological sphere, without remainder*" (Agamben, 2018c, 19).

The common definition of a sign shared by linguistics is that a sign is that which stands for something else: *'aliquid stat pro aliquot'.* Whether referring to reality or only to other signs, whether conventional or arbitrary, a sign is that which gains its meaning and coherence only on the basis of difference from that which it represents or difference from other signs like it. This perspective is shared by some of the most prominent modern philosophers of language C.S Pierce and Umberto Eco. C.S. Peirce, one of the founders of modern semiotics coined the following definition: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former" (Peirce 1992, 478). That which stands for something other than itself is therefore also that which makes sense on the basis of differentiation, which is why for Saussure, signs can be arbitrary insofar as they are interpreted only on the basis of their relation to other signs. The sign is a mark that implies simultaneous presence of itself and absence of that which it signifies.

Umberto Eco shows how behind the disparate usages for the word sign there is nonetheless a shared conception underlying semiotics (Pierce's term) and semiology (Saussure) as sciences (Eco, 1986). Eco relies on three arguments to defend his position. The first is the theoretical primacy given to the notion in the history of philosophy: "Why have people used the word sign for more than two thousand years to define phenomena which should be divided into three different categories.(..) From the Stoics to the Middle Ages, from Locke to Peirce , from Husserl to Wittgenstein , there has been a constant attempt to find a common basis for the theory of linguistic meaning and for the theory of pictorial representation, and also for the theory of meaning and the theory of inference." (Eco 1986, 19).

It is precisely this idea that underlies Eco's second argument. He correlates philosophical inquiry itself with semiotics. For Eco, philosophy itself emerges from the recognition of a gap in meaning between signs and the things they signify: "the objection goes against a philosophical instinct, very adequately summarised by Aristotle in terms of the 'wonder' which induces persons to philosophise". (Eco, 1986, 19).

Eco's third argument shows how despite the distinctions between logical statements of fact and linguistic descriptions, it is also the same mechanism that applies whether dealing with strictly linguistic statements or statements of fact: "What is the 'meaning' of the expression 'at home I have ten cats'? Is it its propositional content or what can be inferred from the fact that I have ten cats? One could answer that the second phenomenon has nothing to do with linguistic meaning, since it belongs to the universe of proofs which can be articulated by using the facts represented by the propositions. Yet, is the antecedent evoked by language so easily separable from the language which represented it? (...)The manner of standing for may vary, yet we still face a peculiar dialectic of presence and absence in both cases. Is this not a good enough reason to ask whether a common mechanism, however deep, might govern both phenomena?" (Eco, 1986, 19).

Eco attempts to show that even the distinction between apophantic and non-apophantic discourse shares a common semiotic basis: "Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics and the Sophists had already talked about the differences existing between the meaning of words and the pragmatic nature of the question, the prayer, and the order. Those who oppose a pragmatics of discourse to a semantics of sign units shift the attention from the systems of signification to the process of communication" (Eco, 1986, 22). But the two perspectives are actually complementary for, "One cannot think of the sign without seeing it in some way characterized by its contextual destiny, but at the same time it is difficult to explain why a certain speech act is understood unless the nature of the signs which it contextualizes is explained." (Eco, Ibid.).

## Divided Language

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the invention of the alphabet was crucial in the development of the notion of language as a system of signs of speech. The great classical scholar and philologist James I. Porter points out that reflection on language is possible only on the basis of grasping it as a

totality, the consequence of total phonetisation that allows the emergences of linguistic knowledge : "Grasping this thought leads to the distinction between speaking and knowing that we are speaking: it leads, in other words, to a meta-discursive grasp of language. This theoretical grasp first became available in Greek antiquity towards the end of the fifth century, and it continued to organize the study of Greek to the end of the rhetorical and grammatical tradition. To be provocative, we might say that rhetoric as a science became possible only once this theoretical insight into the systematic totality of language was had." (Porter 2010, 512). In other words, the existence of language as system implies self-reference: the capacity to distinguish between saying and knowing that we are saying something. Barry Powell (Powell, 2012) has argued that this is due to the difference between the pictorial value of a letter and its actual pronounced name: "unlike syllabograms, named by their value, letters have names that are different from their values. So [β] is called *beta* and B is called *bee"*. (Powell 2012, 44). Alphabetisation systematises language whilst at the same time dividing it into two by separating image and sound, writing and speech, speaking and knowing that we speak.

The semiotic conception of language (which comprises all conceptions of language) relies on a unitary notion of the sign as 'something that stands in for something else'. But the sign itself is at the same time split into two. Semiotics views human language as characterised by two distinct modes of signification. In linguistics these are known as the distinctions between name/discourse, langue/parole, semiotic/semantic, sense/denotation.

These are not discoveries of modern linguistics but an inheritance from the earliest Western reflections on language. To strengthen the point, Agamben shows how the modern conception of semiotics owes its origin to the very earliest reflections on language. As we discussed in the previous chapter: "*Contrary to a mistaken belief that endured for some time, this definition of language was in no way Saussure's discovery. Already implicit in Aristotle's 'On Interpretation', it was comprehensively elaborated by the Stoic philosophers, who regarded the sêmeion as an entity comprised of the inseparable connection between a sensible sêmainon and an intelligible sêmainomenon*." (Agamben, 2018c, 2).

The ancient Greeks referred to this distinction as one between names and propositions. Both Plato and Aristotle distinguished the level of names to that of discourse, or what is said in general ('book', 'Sally') to what can be said as connection of terms (very good book, Sally is happy). This distinction corresponds in contemporary linguistics to 'langue' or 'semiotic' (language as a system) in

distinction from speech or discourse, ('parole' or 'semantic'). In contemporary linguistics this has been renamed by Emile Benveniste as the distinction between the *semiotic* and *semantic.*

Reflecting on the legacy of Saussure, Benveniste defines the Semiotic in the following way: "The semiotic designates the mode of significance that is proper to the linguistic sign and which constitutes it as a unit….The only question by which the sign and its existence are recognised, is answered by yes or no….Taken in itself, the sign is pure identity with itself, pure alterity to any other, the signifying basis of language, the necessary stuff of enunciation. It exists when it is recognised as significant by all members of a linguistic community" (Benveniste 1974, 64).

The Semantic is totally different and operates not on the level of recognition but that of understanding: "the problems posed here are a function of language as producer of messages. But the message is not reduced to a succession of units to be identified separately; it is not an addition of signs that produces meaning, rather it is the sense conceived of as a whole, which is realised and divided into individual signs, i.e. the words." (Benveniste, Ibid.).

There is therefore an intimate relationship between the fact that language is said to consist of a system of signs and its dual or split nature. But a problem emerges when one attempts to shift from a system of signs recognised as autonomous to a system of signs as already understood. Understood as based on a system of signs the act of speech is always split between the entities it is meant to refer to (semiotic) and the words it says (semantic). As Benveniste proclaimed, "in reality the world of the sign is closed. From the sign to the sentence there is no transition…a dividing hiatus separates them". (Benveniste, 1974, 65) Let's take the word 'tree' for example. We can only say what we mean by that word if we take it that the real tree exists as the semiotic sign 'tree' prior to our uttering the word, "*In other words, language would have the capacity of suspending its denotative power in discourse, in order to signify things in a purely virtual way in the form of a lexicon*" (Agamben, 2018b,8)

Language is constructed by "*means of a patient and meticulous analysis of the act of speech, supposing that speaking is possible only on the presupposition of language, and that things are always already named (even if it is impossible to explain-if not in a mythological way-how and by whom) in a system of signs that refer to this potentially and not actually."* (Agamben, Ibid.). This throws linguistics into a seemingly irresolvable paradox. For, "*if the definition of language as a 'system of signs' is both at the origin of structuralism and allowed for the birth of a new science of*

*language, according to Benveniste 'this was blocked by the same tool the created it: the sign".* (Agamben, 'Foreword' in Benveniste, 2016).

Language exists as both a system of rules, whether in the mind or in a Grammar book, and as speech or articulation: each is sought to be based on the existence of the other but without explaining how a shift from one to the other is possible. Linguistics, which claims to afford human beings access to their most essential nature as speaking beings, ends up preventing them from articulating the very thing which is said to define them : "*all we know of language has been learnt starting from speech, and all we comprehend of speech is starting from language; and, yet, the interpretation of the act of speech through language, which makes knowledge possible, ultimately leads to an impossibility of speaking*" (Agamben, 2018b., 9).

As we saw in the discussions of Aristotle and 20$^{th}$ century phonetics, insofar as language, in order to signify, must remain split, it is impossible to explain how both poles of language refer to one another without resorting to a naturalistic or idealist fantasies to account for linguistic knowledge. In the following section I will demonstrate how this pertains to some significant trends of contemporary philosophy.

## Sign Language

The fact that all semiotic analysis begins from speech and at the same time conceives of speech as always already presupposing virtual semiotic terms is the reason why Umberto Eco can mount a critique of the dominance of the myth of 'textuality' in contemporary linguistics. The predominance of 'textuality' as a locus for the true understanding of signification particularly as a result of the work of Jacques Derrida (1976) is obvious from this perspective, because a textualized vision of language starts from the presupposition that nothing exists prior to the text. Eco argues that: "the ability of the textual manifestations to empty, destroy, or reconstruct pre-existing sign-functions depends on the presence within the sign-function (that is, in the network of content figures) of a set of instructions oriented toward the (potential) production of different texts" (Eco 1986, 25). In other words, the text is a machine that claims to produce meaning ad infinitum through the interplay of presence/absence – the hallmarks of Derridean deconstruction. And yet, as Eco points out, "if signs (expressions and content) did not pre-exist the text, every metaphor would be equivalent simply to saying that something

is something. But a metaphor says that that (linguistic) thing is at the same time something else" (Eco, Ibid.). In other words, the text must annul that which comes prior to it in order to appear as an axiomatic structure which determines signification. The idea that language is always writeable or structured like a text depends on a metaphysics which claims in advance that the world itself is fractured into differential registers.

Eco provides a critique of post-structuralism (which echoes the one deployed more recently by Agamben,2006, 2018b) by showing how Saussure owes his conception of signification to Leibnitz. According to Eco, the idea of a 'fracture' of presence which divides and differentiates but at the same time remains in relation is taken from Leibniz. Leibniz attempted to construct a rational and universal language. Eco argues that "in the short text *De organo sive arte cogitandi* Leibniz searches for a restricted number of thoughts from whose combination all the others could be derived (as is the case with numbers). He locates the essential combinational matrix in the opposition between God and nothing, presence and absence. The binary system of calculation is the wondrous likeness of this dialectics" (Eco, 1986, 23). As Leibniz puts it in that text: "the greatest remedy for the mind consists in the possibility of discovering a small set of thoughts from which an infinity of other thoughts might issue in order, in the same way as from a small set of numbers [the integers from 1 to 10] all the other numbers may be derived" (Leibniz in Eco 1995, 275).

Eco's analysis is furthered by Agamben in his discussion of Leibniz's linguistic rationalism (Agamben 2018c) Agamben shows how Leibniz *"strove his entire life to develop a science (the 'characteristica universalis' or 'spécieuse générale' ), which — more than two centuries before Saussure's general science of signs — would have revealed to man the 'reason' that binds sign and thing" – As Leibniz put it, science is required :'since it is this characteristic which gives words to languages, letters to words, numbers to Arithmetic, notes to Music. It teaches us how to fix our reasoning, and to require it to leave, as it were, visible traces on the paper of a notebook for inspection at leisure. Finally, it enables us to reason with economy, by substituting characters in the place of things"*. (Leibniz, in Agamben, 2018c.,16).

Agamben's research shows that Leibniz pursued this lifelong task on the basis of his encounter with an earlier group of linguists, who, with religious fervour and frustrated with their attempt to restore the original Adamic language wished to devise a universal and pure mathematical system of signs. The Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher devised a system within which each element of logic formed a foundation for the next until he constructed what became known as a 'tree of

reason': "*Kircher came to construct a true and proper tree of Reason. Proceeding from its base up a vertical trunk and along its horizontal branches, this tree condensed within itself the entire universe of logic, supplying the elemental structure of every possible knowledge. At that point, it remained only to assign each of these primary elements an appropriate sign, so that the tree of Reason would be transformed into a tree of Language and man would come into possession of a perfect equivalent of the language of Babel*." (Agamben, Ibid.).

In order for the 'Tree of Language' to emerge, it was necessary therefore to find a way to correctly assign signs to each term or branch. The arborial structure of linguistic analysis developed by historical linguistics in the 19th century which culminates in the construction of a common Indo-European language on the basis of shared 'roots' owes its origin to the schema proposed by Leibnitz. Agamben shows how this idea originates in Kircher: "*Encountering the research conducted by Kircher, Wilkins and Dalgarno, it dawned on Leibniz that a certain problem must be resolved in order to make this transition from the tree of Reason to the tree of Language — and thus to construct the universal language that would throw open the portals to knowledge that were closed at Babel. What was to be discovered was the rational nexus that binds the sign to the thing it represents (that binds the signifier to the signified, we would say today).*" (Agamben, 2018c, 16).

As both Eco and Agamben demonstrate, contemporary semiotics is carrying out Leibnitz's fantasy: "*Turning to the other aspect of Leibniz and Dalgarno's research — the necessary relation that must exist between sign and thing (or signifier and signified) — this finds its precise correlate in the other great current of contemporary structural linguistics: Jakobson's critique of Saussure's theory of the arbitrariness of the sign"* (Agamben, Ibid.). The Deconstructionist dogma that 'there is nothing outside the text' relies on this conception far more than it would care to admit. For this reason, it is also not so easy to distinguish Derridean post-structuralism from the other contemporary dominant linguistic theory – the Universal Syntax of Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky claims that he is faithful to what he terms 'Cartesian Linguistics' (Chomsky, 2009) Chomsky is explicit that his program is indebted to the Port-Royal Grammarians, amongst which Leibnitz was leading member, and to the Cartesian rationalism that inspired it : "The creative aspect of language use is once again a central concern of linguistics, and the theories of universal grammar that were outlined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been revived and elaborated in the theory of transformational generative grammar… I have tried to indicate, in this summary of Cartesian

linguistics and the theory of mind from which it arose, that much of what is coming to light in this work was foreshadowed or even explicitly formulated in earlier and now largely forgotten studies. (Chomsky, 2009,107). Agamben shows how Chomsky's radical epistemological theory claims that "*every speaking subject acts as if, inherent in their res cogitans, there were a kind of generative code capable of establishing connections between semantemes and phonemes in an indefinite number of possible combinations. Everything happens as if, in other words, every language had a generative Grammar that could account for any possible phrase, by reference to a base of minimal structures and a defined system of rules for their transformation — encompassing a phrase's semantic content as well as its phonological structure*" (Agamben, 2018c,17).

Furthermore, Agamben shows that *"The analogy becomes even more pronounced if we bear in mind that Chomsky, and the other theorists of this new linguistic school, did not attempt to deduce the generative Grammars of existing natural languages through a process of analysis. Instead, they arrived at the construction of purely abstract generative Grammars by a procedure they termed 'analysis by synthesis' — whose very name recalls Kircher's analytic-synthetic method. Such Grammars are like 'logical machines' that provide the structural description of theoretical and virtual languages, just like the philosophical language of the seventeenth century rationalists"* (Agamben, Ibid*).*

Chomsky's theory owes it coherence to the fact that, in accordance with the double split structure of language we are familiar with, Chomsky ignores real existing historical languages in favour of deducing a universal syntactical structure behind each language located in the mind.

Jean Claude Milner (1990) had criticised this theory, along with all theories that propose that language is innate. These theories take their object of analysis to be 'language as such'- a grammaticised code - rather than any specific actual spoken languages, which as research shows are dependent on wildly different environmental circumstances in which human infants are raised. Once again, the validity of Chomskyan linguistics rests on the distinction between two planes of language which cannot be shown to connect to each other without a significant weakening of the theory. As Agamben points out, "*careful examination thus reveals that the second fundamental theme of contemporary linguistics — alongside the theory of generative Grammar — is precisely the construction of the characteristica universalis sought by Leibniz: the science that would allow the establishment of a rational connection between sign and thing*." (Agamben,2018c,17).

The attempt to find a correlation between sign and thing finds expression in Structuralist attempts to deduce the meaning of words only from the nature of signs themselves. Whilst the relations between signs is arbitrary for Saussure and structural or conventional for Jakobson – both theorists begin their research from precisely the challenge set down by Leibnitz. (Dosse, 1991). It is not therefore at all remarkable that Emile Benveniste, who sought to develop structuralism to account for the role of human speech in language production, found a correlation in his work in none other than Chomsky's project. For Benveniste, insofar as Chomsky "considers language as production…it starts from the ground of speech as produced" (Benveniste, 1968).

Benveniste convincingly argued that Saussure did not distinguish between signified and referent, the external thing or object that language must refer to. Saussurean semiotics remains locked within the relationship between signs in and of themselves but is never able to articulate the relationship between signs and external reality (See Benveniste, 1968, and Moses,2001). In addition, Benveniste points out that because the semiotic system is closed and self-referential, there is no room within to explain how an actual speaking person is able to utilise it. This problem is the reason why Benveniste attempted to explain the presence of subjectivity within language, whereby the actual speaker interrupts the differential relations between signs by taking up a place within language. On this basis Benveniste tries to move beyond the distinction between signifier and signified, both belonging to the pole of language he calls 'Semitoic', and actual discourse or communication, which takes place when a speaker takes up language and tries to say something, the 'Semantic pole of language. It is the conversion of semiotics into semantics that interests Benveniste and not simply the inter-relation of signs that remain locked within the realm of the semiotic.

It is all the less surprising therefore that when Benveniste attempted to find a path from the semiotic plane of language to its actual utterance in human speech, he too could only do so by referring to the role of pronouns and shifters (I, YOU, HERE, NOW, THERE), the parts of speech which have no real referent (Benveniste, 1968). Shifters lack any material referent and are empty signs that only signify insofar as a speaker assumes them in any particular act of speech. Speech can only be conceived of in relation to a system of signs that the human speaker must take up, and yet those signs only function insofar as they abstract from the real person speaking and consider them only as positions or roles within a discourse. Once again self-reference occurs only on the basis of a split language.

As we saw from our discussion of Leibnitz, linguistics in its modern guise originates from an attempt to provide a fully rational construction of signs aiming to restore the proper relation between signs

and words. The dominance of this conception in contemporary linguistics, science and philosophy is all pervasive, foreclosing any further reflection on the politico-historical origins of the semiotic understanding of language and the nature of signs.

## Self-Reference

The unbridgeable gap between the two planes of language is the source of a common paradox raised time and again in the history of philosophy: the 'paradox of self-reference". The paradox emerges whenever as attempt is made to locate the existence of language within language itself: the question of how it is possible to refer to language if we are always already speaking it.

Beginning with Plato's theory of ideas, the paradox was posed most recently by Bertrand Russell (Livinsgston 2012, Agamben 1990). Put simply, the paradox consists of the fact that insofar as language names objects in the world, one cannot name the totality of things named by language without referring to something that language already names – there is no name for language. All linguistic terms therefore rely on some level of self-reference – to say 'this is a book' means to say "this is a book insofar as it is named." It is a book insofar as I am also naming it as such. This means that language as such is implied in every spoken example of language, without us being able to attest to that fact directly.

Bertrand Russell noted this paradox when speculating on the possibility of self-reference in specifically logical terms. For Russell, the paradox of self-reference arises when we "take *language* itself to comprise the totality of propositions or meaningful sentences. But then there will clearly be meaningful propositions referring to this totality itself. Such propositions include, for instance, any describing the general character or detailed structure of language as a whole. But if there are such propositions, containing terms definable only by reference to the totality in which they take part, then a Russell-style paradox immediately results. By way of a fundamental operation of self-reference that is both pervasive and probably ineliminable on the level of ordinary practice, language's naming of itself thus invokes a radical paradox of non-closure at the limits of its nominating power." (Livingston 2012 ,24).

But as Livingston explains, posing the paradox in logical terms is dependent on an already assumed linguistic ideology: "In its most general form, Russell's paradox concerns the possibility of constructing sets or groupings of any individual objects or entities whatsoever. Since the operation of grouping or collecting individuals under universal concepts or general names can also be taken to be the fundamental operation of linguistic reference, it is clear from the outset that the paradox has important consequences for thinking about language and representation as well" (Livingston 2012, 22-23).

As an analysis of the "philosophies of Grammar' in the twentieth century shows (Gaskin 2001, Livingston 2002), thinkers from Frege and Russell, through to Heidegger take for granted Grammar as a fundamental self-referential structure and as the form in which language relates to the world. Whether this self-reference is Ontological, propositional or cognitive is less important than the shared presupposition of contemporary linguistic philosophers: that insofar as there is language it is only as a Grammar that truth is an issue for it.

The paradox of Self-reference shows that "*to enquire after the nature of linguistic science leads us to call into question the very possibility of linguistics itself, insofar as it is a science that seeks the reason of language and hopes to oblige language to justify itself rationally"* (Agamben, 2018c.,14).The relation to the split nature of language is evident here and the paradox can be reformulated as the question regarding the relation between the Semantic and Semiotic planes of language.

In a far-reaching analysis, Livingston wants to refer Agamben's insistence on the importance of linguistic self-reference to the debate between Russell and Frege that culminated in Russel's famous paradox. But Agamben only refers to the debate in order to undermine the autonomy of logic and show how it is dependent on the presuppositional structure of language in the first place: *"The fortune of set theory in modern logic is born of the fact that the definition of the set is simply the definition of linguistic meaning. The comprehension of singular distinct objects m in a whole M is nothing but the name. Hence the inextricable paradoxes of classes, which no 'beastly theory of types' can pretend to solve. The paradoxes, in effect, define the place of linguistic being. Linguistic being is a class that both belongs and does not belong to itself, and the class of all classes that do not belong to themselves is language. Linguistic being (being-called) is a set (the tree) that is at the same time a singularity (the tree, a tree, this tree); and the mediation of meaning, expressed by the symbol ∈, cannot in any way fill the gap in which only the article succeeds in moving about freely.* (Agamben, 1993, 8).

The paradox of self-reference emerges not only when we consider linguistic terms from a logical or mathematical framework. In fact, the paradox is as old as the reflection on language itself and constitutes the limit of linguistic science operating on the basis of the assumption of two different planes of language. As we already discussed in the previous chapters, Greek philosophy of language, in both Plato and Aristotle, distinguishes within language the plane of names from the plane of discourse. The name signifies pure existence, that which calls a thing into being, the foundation of discourse (Backer, 2010). Whilst the predications of being are designated by proper nouns, the first essence or substance, is, as we saw designated by a 'shifter' the demonstrative pronouns "this" or "that" being. In Linguistics since Aristotle, the status of names along with deictic pronouns are the pure names which in relation to other names and terms hold the same relation that the first substance does to other qualities (Gaskin,2001). Insofar as something 'is' indicatively, it can be separated from its other qualities parallels the way that a human being is named, the proper name and the indicative pronoun are synonymous – John is not anything specific that John 'is' but the term that is used as a foundation for all other definitions – tall, strong, white etc. – "*the problem of being-the supreme metaphysical problem- emerges from the very beginning as inseparable from the problem of the significance of the demonstrative pronoun, and for this reason it is always already connected with the field of indication*" (Agamben, 2006, 18).

In terms of Aristotle's Ontology, Agamben summarises the consequences of this issue: "*It is precisely by means of the anonymity and insubstantiality of linguistic Being that philosophy was able to conceive of something like pure existence, that is, a singularity, without real properties. If the linguistic term was not anonymous, if we already had names for the name, we would already encounter things with their real properties; there would never be a point at which our power of naming (or of the attribution of properties) would come to a halt. This stopping point cannot be constituted by a non-linguistic being, since language can name everything, its naming power knows*

*no limits (the non-linguistic, in this sense, is nothing other than a presupposition of language)* (Agamben, 2000, 71).

The paradox of self-reference emerges not due to the eternal objective nature of language but because from its inception the concept of language as system has always been tied to an apparatus of alphabetisation : "*The identification of these differences is not a discovery of modern linguistics, but the constitutive experience of the Greek reflection on being. Plato already clearly opposed the level of the name (onoma) to that of discourse (logos).*" (Agamben, 2018b, 6).

The deflection of this paradox onto a purely logical plane is a consequence of the fracture that linguistics inserts within language. This is evident also in Aristotle's philosophical reflections on the meaning of being. Whether in Russell, or more recently in the philosophy of Badiou (Badiou,1999), the construction of a mathematical/logical basis for Ontology is possible only as a result of the semiotic prejudice that overdetermines the way we conceive the relationship between language and world. Mathematics simply proposes that it has a bare and pure semiotic relation to the world on the basis of this initial presupposition. The ability to construct a paradox of self-reference on a purely logical/mathematical level is afforded only on the basis of an adoption of the semiotic paradigm of language.

This means that the paradox of self-reference is an ideological consequence of semiotics, dependent on the Ontological apparatus of alphabetisation. It is not a feature of linguistic being as such. The distinction between sense and denotation or semiotic and semantic that allows for self-reference is premised on the possibility of separating and externalising language as an autonomous system. But the splitting of language in turn entails that there is no passage between the two levels – precisely what necessitated the invention of a human voice as a natural location of letters in Aristotle's Ontology.

# The End of Philosophy?

In a penetrating analysis, Isabel Thomas Fogiel has demonstrated the relationship between the problem of self-reference and the trope of the 'end of philosophy' so common in twentieth century thought.(Fogiel 2001) The abandonment of reference for the sake of self-reference has led many contemporary thinkers to declare an 'end of philosophy': the inability of philosophy to refer to the world without falling into contradictions of self-reference necessitates that it is abandoned as an epistemological framework oriented towards truthful proposition in favour of an exposition of language that points towards extra-linguistic experiences or revelations.

Fogiel' thesis is that the attempts to declare an end to philosophy share a common structure in both analytic and continental thought. Fogiel shows that this is a structure common to Searle, and, Rorty as it is to Levinas or Heidegger. Beginning from a critique of representation – the inability of language to express that which it speaks about - the declarations end with an indication of something which can only remain unsaid or gestured at and abandon philosophy for something considered wholly other or outside whether it be religion, ordinary language, or emobidment considered as non-linguistic.

Fogiel's analysis is important insofar as it shows that behind the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy lies a prior unity of purpose; both traditions put forward an anti representationalist account of language. She shows how Analytic philosophy attempts to purify language from its semantic representationalism through logical analysis of terms or the subsumption of philosophy as a branch of natural science, whilst the Continental tradition, exploiting the distinction between 'saying' and showing'(Wittgenstein), or 'the saybale' and the 'said (Heidegger, Levinas) focuses on the existence of language in its apodictic 'taking place' or opening to the world over and above any representational or semantic content.

In contemporary thought, the critique of reference is heavily indebted to the work of J.L Austin (1962). Austin's theory of performative utterances transformed the science of language from a descriptive or reconstructive enterprise of the parts of speech into a theory of social action. Using examples such as commands, promises and declarations, Austin showed how words and utterances were now to be understood in the way in which the effect or create a reality in the world, within a

social context. Austin's intention was to show the multiple ways in which speech is used in action, not simply to generate an inventory of speech acts and their structure.

Searle reinvigorated positivism by trying to mobilise Austin's theory for the sake of creating a formal general and universal description of the types of actions generated by speech (see Fogiel 2001) He develops one of the potentialities of Austin's approach in the direction of a 'science of parts of speech". Cavell, on the other hand, rejects formal linguistic analysis, and mobilises Austin towards a discursive practice of idiomatic contextualised relativism which eschews generalisations and philosophical abstractions. Thereby, every language becomes a private language, constructed only by its particular speakers. (See the reconstruction of both positions in Fogiel, 2001).

The theme of the end of philosophy gives birth to either a formal logic that denies its linguistic historical origins or a generalised scepticism that is unable to account for its own coherence. The reliance on Austin's theory led both Cavell and Searle to claim that their own practice was post-philosophical, dissolving into a pure positivist linguistics for Searle, and for Cavell a self-refuting scepticism. Fogiel exposes how "oscillation between two extremes and self-refutation are, here too, the dominant symptoms of a philosophy that hope for its own end." (Fogiel, 2001.,48).

If for Searle, the formalisation of speech acts ignores the phenomenological taking place of actual speech, then for Cavell the relativisation and contextualisation of every utterance ignores the objective universal dialogical nature of language, which must be first objective or ideal, if it is to be utilised in a particular speech act. Following Habermas, Fogiel positions herself between radical scepticism or scientism and wishes to demonstrate the autonomy of philosophy as a discipline. In line with the Habermasian critique of 'performative contradictions' she exposes the claims regarding the 'end' or 'impossibility' of philosophy to be operating on the basis of a performative contradiction – the claim 'there is no philosophy' is in itself a philosophical truth claim that relies on the authority of logic and the tradition of philosophy in order to remain valid. Habermas's philosophy attempts to overcome the limitations of both scepticism and scientism. For Habermas, the theory of performatives is transformed into a universal pragmatics of communicative competence, that will function both as the basis of a social theoretical analysis of modernity and an indicator of anthropological constants of the species. The philosophy of consciousness is replaced by a universal pragmatics. In this way, Habermas develops a systemic and coherent critique of modern rationality on the basis of an idealistic linguistic intersubjective model (Habermas, 1985) Yet Habermas himself falls into a fatal

contradiction in his attempt to demonstrate the reality of his consensual model of language, oriented around what he terms the ‘ideal speech situation’.

The communicative rational and allegedly post metaphysical ideal of truth Habermas refers to is on the one hand located outside the individual subject – it is a dialogical ‘achievement’ within the structure of the linguistic consensus that emerges as a result of persuasion of argument – a Socratic rational truth (minus the charm) that illuminates all linguistic interaction by pointing to an ideal of agreement – which for Habermas is the guiding principle according to the self-understanding of modernity as a self-legitimating rational ethical order (Habermas, 1985).

On the other hand, despite the insistence on the ideality of ‘dialogue constitutive universals’, Habermas cannot avoid naturalising ‘linguistic competence’ as anthropological ‘cognitive interests’ (See Habermas,1972) The naturalisation of what Habermas takes to be post-enlightenment modern cognitive and ethical ideals (if they ever were such) in the form of a philosophical anthropology would seem to betray the attribution of illocutionary force to language. Why are the protocols of the ideal speech situation insufficient themselves to guarantee and safeguard the consensual result? And why must they be interpreted on the basis of anthropologically grounded ‘cognitive interests”? – Once again rationality finds its locus deep within the recesses of the human being, never fully localisable except as a postulate of the structure of the organism, which like in Chomsky, magically knows how to regulate itself to achieve the ‘right’ outcome in social interactions.

For Habermas the design of an ideal speech situation is necessarily implied in the structure of potential speech (Habermas, 1970) We will not be surprised to find that it precisely the role of the shifters that here guarantee the coherence of the system and allow the ‘shift’ from the register of potential consensus into the ideal speech situation. In Habermas’ interpretation , the transcendental legacy of shifters is seen to point toward the taking place of language as empty particles of speech indicate the realisation and actualisation of a cognitive potential, which the human being must be assumed to have intended all along: “If one thus analyses the structure which we generate and describe by means of pure dialogue-constitutive universals, one arrives at a number of symmetrical relations for the ideal speech situation. Pure intersubjectivity is determined by a symmetrical relation between I and You (We and You), I and He (We and They). An unlimited interchangeability of dialogue roles demands that no side be privileged in the performance of these roles: pure intersubjectivity exists only when there is complete symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity, among the partners of

communication. As long as these symmetries exist, communication will not be hindered by constraints arising from its own structure" (Habermas, 1970, 371).

As we see then, the autonomy of philosophy as a theory of communication relies for its coherence on the principle of non-contradiction. This principle makes sense only if we assume that language is an autonomous system – yet both demonstrations rely on each other as an assumption and thus the demand to communicate is a circular one. The unforced force of the better argument turns out to be a forced force of rational domination which purchases its coherence through the paradox of a truth that is simultaneously attributed to impersonal properties of speech yet also as a shared evolutionary property of the human organism insofar as it belongs to a species – and here again nature loves a rule as much as it loves to rule. The 'learning potential' of ideal speech situations and the institutional framework of modern society will for Habermas steer the species onwards to more and more enlightenment without remainder. Having to always already be striving toward agreement, in the ideal speech situation, no always somehow still means yes.

The problem with insisting that human beings by their nature must 'actualise' cognitive potentials of rational discourse is evident when we consider the practical reality of speechlessness or refusal to engage in discussion. Agamben himself offers such an example when discussing Habermas and his 'school'. It is firstly important to remember that the notion of transcendental condition of ethics in the form of a principle of obligatory communication was not invented by the post-war German philosophers who attempted to rehabilitate the German Republic following the war. It served as the rallying cry for linguistic metaphysics since it was formulated by Aristotle in the form of the principle of non-contradiction, the cornerstone of Aristotle's construction of the possibility of philosophy as science. Agamben explains: "*In his proof of the "strongest of all principles," the principle of non-contradiction, in Book Gamma of the Metaphysics, Aristotle is already compelled to take recourse to such argumentation. "Some, owing to a lack of training," he writes, "actually ask that it be demonstrated; for it is lack of training not to recognize of which things demonstration ought to be sought, and of which not. In general, it is impossible that there should be a demonstration of everything, since it would go on to infinity and, therefore, not be a demonstration__ But even this [the principle of non-contradiction) can be demonstrated, in the manner of a refutation, if only the disputant says something. If he says nothing, it is ridiculous to look for a statement in response to someone who says nothing; such a person, insofar as he is such, is altogether similar to a vegetable" (*Aristotle, in Agamben, 2017, 803-4).

As expected, the refusal or inability to speak is for Aristotle the equivalent of the refusal or inability to be human as such: "*Insofar as they are founded on a tacit presupposition (in this case, that someone must speak), all refutations necessarily leave a residue in the form of an exclusion. In Aristotle, the residue is the plant-man, the man who does not speak. It suffices for the adversary simply and radically to cease speaking for the refutation to lose its force. (*Agamben, 2017, 803).

For both Aristotle and the modern theorists of Universal pragmatics, proper communication is a defining feature of the species, and hence a social necessity. The violation of this principle or a failure to live up to its demands, excludes those who do so from the human species: "*According to this curious doctrine, a speaking being cannot in any way avoid communication. Insofar as, unlike animals, they are gifted with language, human beings find themselves, so to speak, condemned to agree on the criteria of meaning and the validity of their actions. Whoever declares himself not wanting to communicate contradicts himself, for he has already communicated his will not to communicate.* (Agamben, Ibid.).

When Habermas and Karl Otto Apel formulate the transcendental conditions of dialogue as an ethical universal in their attempt to de-Nazi German philosophy, the unfortunately resemble the same gesture they are combatting, albeit in the form of a universalist philosophy of communication. Consider the following example of the Muselmann, the Nazi death camp prisoner who, losing the will live and the capacity of speech can no longer respond to any linguistic injunction: "*Let us imagine for a moment that a wondrous time machine places Professor Apel inside the camp. Placing a Muselmann before him, we ask him to verify his ethics of communication here too. At this point, it is best, in every possible way, to turn off our time machine and not continue the experiment. Despite all good intentions, the Muselmann risks once again being excluded from the human. The Muselmann is the radical refutation of every possible refutation, the destruction of those extreme metaphysical bulwarks whose force remains because they cannot be proven directly, but only by negating their negation*. (Agamben, 2017, 804).

It is a great shame that the courageous attempts of the post-war professorial generation deteriorated into an ethics that resembles petty bureaucracy and policing. One need not go as far as evoking a Muselmann to refute the sacred tenants of so-called Communicative ethics. We can point out its limitations by reflecting on a situation in which anyone, upon confronting any state official or law-enforcement officer, chooses not to speak. To interpret the subsequent behaviour of the administrator

or police officer as a proper application of the dialogical principle of the 'necessity to communicate' reveals the limitations of Habermasian ethics.

This is why the attempt to rehabilitate self-reference as an indication of the autonomy of philosophy is doomed to fail. Indeed, following on from her critical appraisal of Habermas, Fogiel's attempt to overcome the philosophy of the subject dispenses with the naturalisation of 'cognitive competence'. Instead she reflects on the shared reality of language based on her evocation of the plural pronoun 'we' which serves an 'objective' authority that allows for rational exchange of language. Fogiel points out that, in order to say anything at all, one always already speaks as if another was also speaking. Every 'I' is therefore, always also a 'we'. In this way the authority of linguistic expression is displaced from a monological solipsistic consciousness to the transcendental power of language as such, which generates from within its speakers as co-producers of meaning. (see Fogiel, 2001, 147).

The inter-subjective and anonymous nature of linguistic exchange is the basis for Fogiel's attempt to secure philosophy as an autonomous rational discipline that allows for a fair evaluation of all systems and opinions. But this is established through a foundation in a dialogical self-reference. In this way philosophy survives as a post-historical system for the facilitation of rational social negotiation. For Fogiel, who unwittingly mimicks the nihilism she aims to overcome, after the end of history, philosophy and humanity can keep on talking whilst having nothing to speak about except the fact they speak.

Fogiel's definition of philosophy had already been celebrated and canonised by Alexander Kojeve (1968a), responsible for the resurrection of Hegelianism in France in the early Twentieth Century and an influence on both the existentialist nihilism and liberal mythology that equates the end of history with the end of philosophy. Kojeve showed how from a Hegelian perspective "Briefly and clearly, Philosophy is understood, since Kant, as the (coherent) set of (coherent) discourses that speak of *everything* (or of anything) while speaking equally of themselves. One can also say that any "science" (and thus *every* "science," or, if you like, *the* "Science") is *philosophical*, which speaks not only of *that of which* it speaks, but even more so of the fact that it *speaks* of it, and that it is *it* that speaks of it. Inversely, every discourse that does not speak of *itself* (as a *discourse*) is situated by this fact outside of Philosophy and can thus live indefinitely in peace with the latter while ignoring it completely" (Kojeve 1968a, 30).

This definition of philosophy is historical and political insofar as Kojeve argued in his lectures on Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit that "the disappearance of *Philosophy*" (that is, the advent of *sophia,* or of the simultaneity of reference and self-reference) coincides with "the end of Human Time or of History, that is, with the cessation of Action, which means practically: the disappearance of bloody wars and revolutions" (Kojève 1968b, 435). According to this schema, philosophy, culminating in the tautology of self-reference, absolves itself into 'wisdom', at the same time as humanity achieves universal peace under a perfectly administered global system.

## Deconstruction as the Fulfillment of Self-Reference

Suspecting the correlation between semiotics and the trope of the 'end of metaphysics' Agamben mobilises a devastating critique of the dominant critical linguistic paradigm of the last few decades– Deconstruction. Derrida famously claimed that the original metaphysical gesture of Aristotle's 'phonocentrism' was the association of 'voice' and 'logos' (Derrida, 1976). Unsurprisingly, throughout his corpus (for example Agamben 2000, 2018b) Agamben points out that it is precisely Aristotle's theory of articulation that Derrida misunderstands when he develops his critique. Both Kevin Attel(2014) and Arthur Willemese(2018) have dedicated full length studies to the relationship between Agamben and Derrida's thought. With the aid of these detailed studies we can see clearly that Agamben's philosophy has no positive relationship to the project of Deconstruction. Moreover, from Agamben's perspective, Derrida represents a reactionary rear-guard attempt to preserve the metaphysics of the sign from within.

In his critique of Derrida, Agamben reverses the Heideggerian critique of the metaphysics of presence in favour of exposing a prior negativity which enables any form of objectification to appear In Derrida's work, linguistic terms are purged of their referentiality and yet maintain their signifying power as pure self-reference: "*deprived of its referential power and its univocal reference to an object, the term still in some manner signifies itself; it is self-referential. In this sense, even Derrida's undecideables (even if they are such "only by analogy") are inscribed in the domain of the paradoxes of self-reference that have marked the crisis of logic in our time*" (Agamben, 2000, 211).

Willemese summarises the difference between the two thinkers well : “While Derrida believes that ‘for the present and for some time to come’ the only way of re-establishing certain concepts and values that are considered subordinate must remain faithful to the main metaphysical schema—and thus to the present of a particular metaphysics of history, or better: of the metaphysics that constitutes “the philosophy of history of the West”—Agamben holds that this metaphysics is entirely contingent, and that philosophical archaeology is the way to its undoing, its rendering inoperative.” (Willemese 2018, xxiii).

There are methodological and philosophical reasons for this that emerge from the different attitude that Agamben and Derrida take towards structuralist linguistics. Kevin Attell(2014) has devoted a study to the different approaches Derrida and Agamben take to the work of Benveniste and Saussure. A full discussion would require far more room but the divergence between Agamben and Derrida can be sufficiently explained based on one particular point of importance in regard to the reception of structuralism.

Derrida’s work is located firmly within the semiotic apparatus. Seeking to liberate writing from the ‘metaphysics of presence’, Derrida’s analysis achieves the full triumph of semiotics over speech. He focuses attention on the fact that within the Saussurean split between signifier and signified there will always be a non-coincidence, the ‘difference’ that the bar between the two signifies. This original displacement is what enables Deconstruction to mobilise itself as a technique of reading that aims to upset any assumed unity or original presence of meaning in the relation between signs. That is, Derrida takes up the Structuralist paradigm and destabilises it from within, accepting and exploiting the Saussurean schema without overcoming it. From this vantage point we should take very seriously the clear analogy that Derrida drew between his own Grammatology – which generates language as a‘text’ that incorporates all codes- and cybernetics (Derrida, 1976). This is a sufficient indication of the limitations of Deconstruction as a critical paradigm.

Walter Mignolo makes a similar point in the context of the colonisation of the New World and proposes, correctly in our opinion that “Derrida should be circumvented in dealing with questions of writing and cultures in the New World for at least three reasons. First, ancient Mesoamerican writing systems are totally alien to the idea of writing as representation of speech that Derrida traced back to ancient Greece. Second, the idea of writing in colonial situations is totally alien to the grammatological program founded in the regional history of Western philosophy of writing. And third, the foundation of national languages during the European Renaissance conceived writing as

having control of the voice and the construction of territoriality rather than as the representation of speech" (Mignolo 1994, "Afterword").

What Derrida's work 'achieves' as a critique of metaphysics is that in deconstruction, language dissolves into pure self-reference; into a system that no longer claims to refer to the world but only to itself. The myth of an original writability and '*differance*' of signification is comprehensible only once linguistic terms cease to function as representational terms and become self-referential. The critique of 'presence' is purchased at the price of the elimination of any external referent to linguistic signs. In other words, Deconstruction is a recapitulation of the paradoxes of linguistics, brought to their full conclusion and resulting in an infinite regress.

By transforming the paradoxes of self -reference into a comprehensive philosophical experiment, Derrida abolishes the referential capacities of language and transforms it into a system of infinite displacements of transcendental writing. From our perspective, this de-materialisation of language should be considered an 'achievement' because it exposes without a shadow of a doubt that metaphysics has always been unable to account for the way in which language, as a system of signs is meant to refer to the world without relying on mystifcations. In this way Derrida serves, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, as a ladder which we must climb and then throw away, in order to see more clearly what needs to be overcome.

It is not the destabilisation of semiotic hierarchies or reversal of semiotic dualities that interests Agamben but rather the far more interesting and original question of how we think language comes to refer to the world in the first place. Insofar as Derrida remains loyal to the 'Semiotic' understanding of language, he neglects to properly interrogate the relationship between actual speakers and their language and thus must remain dependent on a metaphysics of writing, on the basis of which he interprets human speech as always already deferred and displaced. Despite his critique of Benveniste, which we discussed earlier, Agamben is focused on the problematic of the relationship between language and the world, and not simply the relationship between linguistic terms amongst themselves. Linguistic questions must be seen as Ontological, not simply semiotic, which is already an interpretation of language, not an explanation of it.

This is why, for Agamben, Deconstruction remains well within the horizon of metaphysics: *"To isolate the notion of the sign, understood as a positive unity of signans and signatum, from the*

*original and problematic Saussureian position on the linguistic fact as a 'plexus of eternally negative differences' is to push the science of signs back into metaphysics*" (Agamben, 1993b, 75).

As we have seen in our discussion of Aristotle in the previous chapter, it is letters that allow the voice to be articulated as Logos. Metaphysics assumes a voice that is always already writable. For Agamben, Metaphysics is not originally 'presence' but 'negativity' – a removal of the voice in favour of an 'aritculated' one*: "The Derridean critique of metaphysics is therefore founded on an insufficient reading of Aristotle which fails to question precisely the original status of 'gramma" in 'On Interpretation'. Metaphysics is always already a grammatology and the latter is a fundamentology, in the sense that, since Logos takes place in the non-place of the 'phone', the function of negative Ontological foundation belongs to the letter and not to the voice."* (Agamben, 2018, 20).

Instead, Agamben follows Benveniste's critique and asks why is it that the theory of the sign must appear as split, and why is the difference between signifier and signified unsignifiable? Agamben comments that*: "Every semiology that fails to ask why the barrier that establishes the possibility of signifying should itself be resistant to signification, falsifies, with that omission, its own most authentic intention (. . .) The question that remains unasked is the only one that deserved to be formulated: why is presence deferred and fragmented such that something like "signification" even becomes possible?"* (Agamben, 1993b, 137).

Deconstruction appears from this perspective as philosophical casuistry, a priestly discourse that wishes to perpetuate the full administration of language. The paradox of Derridean deconstruction is that it maintains the ambitions of metaphysics whilst emptying it of content and therefore encourages the interminable working over of the texts of philosophy without the capacity to overcome them. Deconstruction empties out the content of philosophical tradition but maintains its force as an authority that now signifies nothing except pure empty signification in itself.
Like the political theology that sheepishly maintains the necessity of the Institution and administrative structure of the Church despite the arrival of the Messiah, a point Agamben himself made in face of the chamber of cardinals headed by the Bishop of Paris in 1999 (see Agamben, 2012) Deconstruction represents a thwarted messianism in the form of an administration of redemption.

The conclusion of semiotics in the form of an idealistic philosophy of self-reference, in both its logical and deconstructive form results in the idea that history and philosophy have reached their fulfillment.

We have argued, following Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle, that the semiotic paradigm is based on the way in which Aristotle constructs letters as the elements of the voice. Semiotics is derivative of an Ontological apparatus premised on the idea of an original writability of spoken language. This means that: *due to the dominance of this phonetic conception of language which sees it as an independent and non-referential entity we can "think of a being entirely without relation to language only through a language without any relation to being*" (Agamben, 2018, 3).

Both the paradox of self-reference and the myth of the end of philosophy are derivative of the split nature of language we have inherited as a consequence of the naturalisation of the alphabet. The semiotic paradigm was developed on the basis of the alphabetisation of speech which allowed for an externalisation, of language as an autonomous totalised system. As we saw, generative Grammar and the cybernetic paradigm it is complicit with perform an internalistation of comparative Grammar as a synchronic system that is believed to be lodged in the mind of each individual speaker as a genetic species inheritance. Comparative Grammar provided a historical horizon for the cultures it analysed insofar as it generated a system of culturally identifiable linguistic roots that form a tradition. Its transformation into a generative Grammar, which universalises language as a biological a-historical system, signals the renaturalisation of language according to the semiotic paradigm. From Chomsky to Habermas, 'language' becomes a cognitive mechanism that whilst remaining structured like semiotic Grammar, abandons its historical dimension.

The dangers are clear, as we saw in our analysis of thinkers such as Habermas, Derrida and Kojeve.. Agamben reflects on the semiotic straightjacket stifling the study of language and its connection to the intensification of social rationalisation: "*If this is true, then linguistics is not merely the science that takes as its object the facts of language. It is rather an appeal to language, asking that it conform to the all-pervasive demand of calculative reason and arrange itself in accordance with a universal calculus. From this point of view, the growing convergence between linguistic research, information theory and cybernetics assumes an extremely particular significance. The tree of language is in fact a branch of that 'mathematical science of the soul' (or mathematical psychology) which already proclaims itself the most important discipline of the immediate future, and to which universal linguistic calculus, information theory and cybernetics are but the precursor" (*Agamben, 2018c, 19).

For Agamben the declaration of an end of history means that "*the West, which realised and brought to completion the potentiality is has inscribed in its language, must now open itself to a globalisation that simulataneously marks its triumph and its end*" (Agamben, Ibid.).To his mind, the so-called end of history is the consequence of the completion of the itinerary of semiotics : "*the exhaustion of the project of a comparative Grammar- that is, of the knowledge that was supposed to guarantee the intelligibility of language – was in fact followed by the emergence of generative Grammar, in other words, of a conception of language whose horizon is no longer historical and exosomatic, but, ultimately biological and innatist. And the promotion of the historical potentiality of language seems to be replaced by the project of a computerisation of human language that fixes it in a communicative code that rather recalls that of animal languages*" (Agamben, 2018, 13).

As I have shown, Western philosophy owes its historical significance and possibility to the intertwining of being language in the form of semiotics Following on from the analysis in previous chapters, this means that both the trope of the end of philosophy and the charge that this claim is a performative contradiction are indeed mutually implicated in the alphabetic paradigm of language.

The so-called end of philosophy, more than signalling the 'triumph' of semiotics, in fact signals the triumph of the foreclosure of alphabetisation as a historical invention. If 'philosophy' as an autonomous practice is finished, this signals the complete naturalisation of the Ontological apparatus of semiotics and bare life, the demise of homo sapiens as an animal that knows and speaks about the fact it speaks and its fulfillment in a bare life that only recognises language as a neutral code. Contra Agamben, any worthy philosophical critique, or critique of philosophy, must ask why self-reference comes to be understood as the final horizon or linguistic reality of humanity? Why does the realisation of the ambitions of linguistics determine our condition as post-historical? These questions will be raised in the conclusion to this thesis.

As we shall see in the following chapter, historical investigation reveals that the relationship between government, history and Grammar already emerge with the adoption of Aristotle's linguistics by Christian theologians. The 'end of history' already begins when 'the word was made flesh' It is only by confronting the relationship between Grammar, theology and history that we can try to untangle the contemporary aporias of linguistics, and therefore potentially understand our political reality a little more clearly. Without such a historical understanding, any philosophical critique that relies on the paradoxes of linguistics, no matter how dialectically subtle, is not only logically incoherent and historically blind but remains impotent in face of the persistent threat of total annihilation.

# Chapter 5

## Grammar and History

*"In fact, nothing has ever had a more naïve power of persuasion than the error of being, as formulated by the Eleatics, for example: after all, every word we say, every sentence we use, speaks in its favour!*
*- Even the Eleatics' adversaries succumbed to the seduction of the Eleatic concept of being: Democritus, for instance, when he invented his atom . . . 'Reason' in language: oh, what a deceptive old woman this is! I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in Grammar.*

- Nietzsche, "Reason in Philosophy", *The Twilight of the Idols*.

If the rationalism of modern linguistics owes its coherence, at the end of the day, to the way in which ancient Greek philosophy correlates language and reason within the concept of 'logos' then an inquiry into the impact of semiotics must contend with a historical analysis of the science that was developed on the basis of this assumption. That science, known as Grammar, has had a crucial influence on the philosophical and theological tradition stemming from post-Aristotelian philosophy, through Christian theology into Heideggerian fundamental Ontology.

When Grammar began to be developed as an autonomous science by the Latin Grammarians of the first and second centuries CE, it was premised on the assumption that the animal voice is 'confused', whilst the human voice is 'articulated' (Agamben, 2006). The thing that enabled this articulation was none other than the belief that, following Aristotle's construction, the human voice can be written – *vox que scribe potest* -."*therefore, the articulated voice is nothing other than a voice that has been transcribed and comprehended- that is, captured- by means of letters."*(Agamben, 2018,19) It is this mechanism which enables the development of the science of Grammar in the centuries following Aristotle and, mediated through Stoic philosophy into the Roman Imperial education system , through to Christian reflection on the centrality of 'Logos' as the word of God up into the linguistic science of modernity which we have inherited. This inheritance ensures the centrality of semiotics in our culture.

# God is in the Details

The word Grammar is Greek in origin: (*ἡ γραμματικὴ τέχνη (grammatike tekne)*) it refers to the skill, expertise, or knowledge belonging to a person considered '*grammatikos*. The adjectival '*grammtikos*' is derived from the noun *grammata*: "letter," which in turn derives from the verb '*graphein'* meaning to "write or draw." From initially meaning 'one who writes letters' to finally being established as a term designating the 'science of language', the definition of Grammar is ultimately based on an understanding of language as a system of written signs. Ancient Grammarians begin to develop their analysis of the parts of speech only after adopting Aristotle's definition of the human voice as 'articulated speech'. (See Agamben, 2018, and Schmidhauser, 2010).

Following Agamben's reconstruction of Aristotle's philosophy my analysis has shown that the development of Ontology is akin to a discussion of Grammatical categories. Aristotle develops Ontology as a kind of 'philosophical Grammar' which separates Being as first essence from the list of other categories in the form of a presupposition – a linguistic mechanism which becomes the basis for the grammatical separation between 'indication' and 'demonstration'. The first essence is spoken about in a way that corresponds, as substance, to the field of meaning of what became known as a demonstrative pronoun *'this* man', *'that* woman' and the second essences correspond to proper nouns. The sphere of pure being is the sphere in which language indicates that the most concrete thing is the most abstract and generic and hence the basis of all other predications. This is also the basis of the paradox of self-reference and the location of the 'taking place' of language: "*The prote ousia, inasmuch as it signifies a tode ti (that is, both the 'this and the 'that) is the point of enactment for the movement from indication to signification, from showing to saying. The dimension of meaning of being is thus a dimension-limit of signification, the point at which it passes into indication. If every category is said necessarily from a prote ousia then at the limit of the first essence nothing more is said, only indicated*". (Agamben, 2006, 18).

The meditation on the problem of indication, and its falling under the sphere of pronouns will become, as we shall see in the following chapter, a central theme in the history of philosophy, raised most acutely in modernity by Hegel and Wittgenstein and finding ultimate expression in the work of Heidegger, who defines the human being as Da-Sein, the being who has to assume its 'there' in order to be, and thus identifies Ontology as a Grammar of 'indication' in such a way that will prove decisive..

From the first Grammarians till the end of the 20th century there has been an approximation between linguistic and historical categories. The fact that the *arche* of predication takes the form of a name that recedes into the past of 'it was' explains why linguistic reflection, which developed in the form of the invention of Grammar in the centuries following Aristotle, always takes the form of a historical reflection on humanity. The condition of human beings as historical beings has been intimately tied to the fact that they are also speaking beings. From its inception the science of Grammar has also been a historical science and the reflection on language as expressed in Grammar was seen to shed light on the historical origin and destiny of mankind.

We have seen how for Grammar to become established as a science it required as its object of analysis the human voice understood as always already 'grammatised' The first generation of Stoic scholars adopted the Aristotelian schema and transmit it through the teachings of Chrysippus to Alexandria where Plotinus and Ammonius, despite being steeped in Neo-Platonism transmit the Aristotelian grammatical schema to Roman scholars versed in Greek. "*During the course of its development, the grammatical reflection of the ancient world formed a connection between grammatical concepts in the strict sense and logical concepts. The definitions of certain parts of discourse thus came to be joined with the Aristotelian classification of legomena kata medeiman sumploken, that is, with the ten categories*" (Agamben, 2006, 20).

In line with the subsumption of Ontological categories into grammatical ones, in the following centuries the Latin scholars adopt the Latin term *"vox quae scribe potest'* – a voice that can be written as opposed to a meaningless sound- as their fundamental object of analysis. Unsurprisingly, scholars point towards the prominence of Grammar as a pedagogical and scientific tool in the early Roman empire, primarily amongst the aristocracy who saw in the cultivation of letters also an indication of social prestige (see Robert A. Kaster 1988).

A decisive shift occurs with the spread of Christianity (Kelly 2002 Colish 1968 Agamben 1996). At the same time as they adopt the definition of human language as 'articulated voice' the early Christians who became Grammarians conceptualise the study of Grammar as the study of history. This makes obvious sense due to the fact that since its birth, Christianity knows itself explicitly as a grammatical religion, mediating the Hebrew scriptural practice through the apparatus of Aristotelian Ontology. Christianity is a religion that begins with the *word* of God as the foundation and first essence. Insofar as the Christian dogma proclaimed by the Gospel of John asserted, in Aristotelian

fashion that “in the beginning was the word” *(in the arche was the Logos*) then from Augustine to Isidiore of Seville and into the middle ages with Anselm and Aquinas, a correspondence is generated between grammatical and historical categories.

The revelation of God’s word is the foundation that maintains the coherence of human speech which indicates the fact that ‘there is language’. This is why the central theological dogmas of the Christian religion are expressed as problems in the experience of language. Christianity thus emerges as a religion of worship centred around the interpretation of the word of god through scripture, liturgy and writing. Christian grammatical science translates the Greek and Latin Grammars into a system that can faithfully render the message of the Hebrew scripture, and then capture the word of god: “It was Augustine and Jerome who fused the Greek and Roman Encyclopedias by following Origen’s example and integrating the Roman Grammarian’s technique of *enarratio* into Biblical criticism. Boethius added the finishing touches with his translations of Aristotle and commentaries on them” (L.J.Kelly 2002, 3).

History takes a central place within this arrangement. Christianity is a historical religion and Christian theology, from this perspective, is always a Grammar. The expectation that the dead Christ will return resurrected lends Christianity a historical sense which was absent from Pagan religions. The real event of the incarnation set to have taken place in a real chronological past determines the future expectation of a return of the dead Christ. Colish shows how for the Christian Grammarians, when God incarnates through the body of Christ and becomes present in space and time “human modes of thought and expression, although still limited by the human condition, could now worthily take on the tasks assigned to them by God. Human language, reborn through the incarnation, could now assist God in spreading the effects of the Incarnation to the world” (Colish 1968, 3).

Consider Augustine, who argues that letters contain a transmissible historical element. Grammar does not only deal with identifying parts of speech but also “since its very name indicated letters, which in Latin is the root of ‘literature, is so happened that anything memorable consigned to letters, necessarily pertained to it. This discipline was thus associated with history, which is one by name but infinite in material, diverse, more full of cares than joy or truth, and a serious affair that is more the business of Grammarians than historians” (Augustine, cited in Agamben, 2000,49). Unsurprisingly, this approach to Grammar is tied in with a theory of signs which was to define the entire medieval semiotic approach: “all instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means

of signs" (*Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur*) says Augustine (in Agamben, Ibid.).

For the first Christian scholars, the name of God replaces the name of Being as the foundation of predication. Insofar as Grammar analyses the parts of speech, then Grammar reveals the many ways in which God can be spoken about. Language is the medium through which the word of God is revealed. Insofar as God's word must have a meaning and an order the study of language occurs through Grammar, which becomes the science which reveals the message of God a historical theology. Christianity brings into the world the idea that humanity has a historical destiny that is revealed to it through the analysis of language – God's word as incarnated in the figure of Christ. The study of Grammar and literature thus become fundamental to the practice of the faithful Christian intent on discovering the meaning of history.

Thus, for the Christian tradition, history pertains first and foremost to the letter – and the dispensation or transmission of the letter through writing is the material that forms the tradition of scholarship the Christian must interpret in order to discover the meaning of history. This formulation owes its coherence directly to the grammatical heritage Christianity adopted from pagan antiquity. Christianity can separate the name of God from the way in which it is transmitted in history because it borrows the double-articulation of language as developed in Greek and then Latin grammatical philosophy. As we know, *"human beings can receive names – which always precede them – only through transmission, the access to this fundamental dimension of language is mediated and conditioned by history*" (Agamben, 2000, 50).

As expressed clearly by early Latin Grammarians like Varro, names exist within a separate plane of language that always precedes speakers as an origin: Humans do not invent names, and names do not emerge from them as if they were simply animal noises but instead "*names reach humans in descending, that is, through historical transmission. Names can only be given and passed on; the act of speech is the object of an ars and therefore susceptible to a technical and rational science. It does not matter here whether names are conceived as a divine gift or a human intention; what is important is that in every case their origin escapes the speaker*" (Agamben, Ibid.).

It is for this reason that we find a theory of allegorical interpretation and the basis of a hermeneutic science serving as the method to unlock the mystery of the divinity within the writings of the early church fathers.

In Origen, long considered the 'father' of Hermeneutics we find a decisive statement connecting scriptural interpretation with the workings of God: "That there are certain mysterious economies made known through the divine scriptures is believed by all, even by the simplest of those who are adherents of the word; but what these economies are, fair-minded and humble men confess that they do not know. If, for instance, an inquirer were to be in difficulty, about the intercourse of Lot with his daughters, or the two wives of Abraham, or the two sisters married to Jacob, or the two hand-maids who bore children by him, they can say nothing except that these things are mysteries not understood by us" (Origen, in Agamben, 2017, 411-412).

By the time Isidore of Seville begins to compile his encyclopaedic *Etymologies* centuries later he can state with the confidence of tradition that "history pertains to Grammar". It is surely no coincidence that Isidore of Seville, one of the most comprehensive Christian scholars, was recently recommended for canonisation as the 'Patron Saint of the Internet" by Pope John the Second, insofar as his historical and religious scholarship afforded, like the internet in its arrogance claims to, a full compendium of all human knowledge. Thus, we see that for the early Christian fathers the study of Grammar reveals the mysteries of history. "They warrant their search for signs and analogues of God in nature, history, and human psychology with scriptural assertions proclaiming that the creation bears witness to God, and that it is a way of knowing him" (Colish, 1968, 222).

In line with the research of Eco, Colish and Kelly we have already mentioned, Agamben shows very clearly how: *"The link between Grammar and theology is so strong in medieval thought that the treatment of the problem of the Supreme Being cannot be understood without reference to grammatical categories. In this sense, despite the occasional polemics of theologians opposed to the application of grammatical methods to sacred scripture, theological thought is also grammatical thought, and the God of the theologians is also the God of the Grammarians*" (Agamben, 2006, 27).

This explains why one of the central proofs of the existence of God is expressed through a deduction of the existence of names in language. When Anselm formulates the Ontological argument that there is no greater being than God he shows how theological questions are ultimately resolved on an Ontological level – the existence of god is one and the same with the existence of language. As Anselm tries to show insofar as 'God' is the greatest term or word which one cannot think beyond, then to merely utter the word 'God' is to imply God's existence. But the nature of this word is revealed to be an empty self-referential signifier – like the original name of being. As pointed out by Anselm's

contemporary Guanilo, God exists not insofar as we can utter the meaningful term 'God' – for what, would someone who did not understand this or that particular language take that word to mean? – Rather, Guanilo suggests, in the very utterance of the word 'God' in the ears of someone who did not understand the message, what is revealed is the existence of language itself, as a non-signifying utterance – a pure name. This pure name is itself a proof of God's transcendence over and above any particular semantic content of words – pure language as pure revelation. Whether we follow Anselm or Guanilo, the termination of predication and meaning will reside either in God as a name that guarantees all others or in the name of God as non-signifying sound that nonetheless serves the same purpose. (See the debate in Agamben, 2000, 2006 and Colish, 1968).

What is important is that in Christian hermeneutics the mystery of God is revealed through the mystery that 'there is a language'. This is why the Christian conception of history is both hermeneutic and Ontological. It results "*from the strategic conjunction of this doctrine of 'mysterious economies' with the practice of the interpretation of the Scriptures*" (Agamben, 2017, 412) This explains why theological categories are always grammatical and historical and the interpretation of the history of theology cannot proceed without taking into account this conjunction and its reliance on Aristotle's Ontology.

A further indication of the relationship between Aristotle's Ontology and fundamental theological concepts lies in the dependence of medieval mysticism on the sanctity of the letters of the voice. When Christian mysticism meditates on the name of God, it reflects on the Judaic legacy through the grammatical categories. In representative 'mystical' thinkers like Meister Ekhart , St.John of Damascus, Alain of Lille and John of the Cross the author of the 'Cloud of Unknowing" "*that which is construed as the supreme mystical experience of being and as the perfect name of God (the 'Grammar' of the verb to be that is at stake in mystical theology) is the experience of the meaning of the gramma itself, of the letter as the negation and exclusion of voice, "which is written but not read"*" (Agamben, 2006, 30).

It is this fact that leads Agamben to claim that despite the apparent distinction within Christianity between a divine Grammar of scholasticism and a silent speculative faith of mysticism, both share the belief that meditation on the structure and elements of language is the righteous path to divinity. Mysticism, far from aiming at a vague or unsayable dimension of meaning is in fact a 'coherent Grammar' which focuses on the letters insofar as they indicate a beyond which is the unnameable name of God, *"the gramma is the final and negative dimension of meaning, no longer an experience*

*of language but language itself, that is its taking place in the removal of the voice. There is thus even a 'Grammar' of the ineffable; or, rather, the ineffable is simply the dimension of meaning of the gramma, of the letter as the ultimate negative foundation of human discourse*" (Agamben, Ibid.).

In his genealogical study of the Christian notion of 'economy' Agamben has shown how 'economy' was defined as "*activity aimed at fulfilling and revealing the divine mystery*" (Agamben, 2017, 406). The Trinitarian apparatus is constructed as a theological explication of God's governance over the world through the mechanism of providence: the administration of earthly life as an 'economy'.

Recently, Nicholas Heron (2017) has provided an exemplary study tracing the origins of the modern notion of administrative power as 'public service' to a specifically Christian political apparatus that emerged from the trinitarian dogma. Most importantly, Agamben argues that the government of the world as providence is secured by separating God's being from God's actions or praxis, which are entrusted to his ministers. The *arche* is separated from its articulation in modes, which are now conceived of according to the articulation between the three elements of the trinity.(Agamben, 2017 and Heron, 2017) The administrative (ad-minister: from the combination of the Latin prefix 'ad', meaning towards and the Latin word 'minister' which means servant or attendant) and political meaning of Grammar is evident already in St. Paul who in Colossians 1:25-26 proclaims : "Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints". For Paul, the word of God is a mystery which has been 'hid' and is now to be revealed through God's ministers.

It is beyond the terms of our research in this thesis to analyse in what way Grammar functions within this schema. Agamben himself, and Heron following him, has shown through an analysis of the political function of Christian liturgy one of the ways in which the incarnated 'logos' functions in terms of political and administrative power. (Homo Sacer 2.4 and 2.5 in Agamben 2017). This analysis is crucial, but it neglects the specific role of Grammar within the Christian governmental schema. Grammar incarnate is the originary principle of Christian theology which allows for it to be split into a trinity in the first place. Only if in the beginning *(arche*) was the word (logos) can the incarnation take place in the body of Christ whose crucifixion enables the trinitarian apparatus of divine articulation to function, A full detailed study of the way in which early Christian thinkers conceived of the relation between Grammar and providence, and therefore the role of language in political power would require an independent research project devoted to an archaeology of theology. I have attempted

to provide signposts for such a study in the first section of this chapter. Nonetheless, it is possible within the terms of the thesis to point towards the necessity of this study. If both Grammar and economy are referred to as 'mysteries' whose revelation and articulation will reveal divine intention for the world, such a study may reveal that the foundation upon which 'economy' relies is none other than the Christian logos itself, that it, through articulated language transformed into a Grammar.

What can be demonstrated in detail, however, is the way in which modern linguistics and philosophy take upon themselves the articulation of a providential Grammar leading, through the edifice of historical linguistics, to the 'end of philosophy' in Heidegger. It is precisely the centrality of Grammar in modern notions of scientific linguistics and German Idealism that was so obvious to Nietzsche, convincing him that a crusade against God must be at the same time a war against Grammar. It is Nietzsche's failure in this campaign that reveals the necessity of a deeper interrogation into the specific ways in which Christianity identified Grammar and providence, a connection which we have provided the background for through our reconstruction of Aristotle's theory of articulation and its role in the development of Ontology. At this stage it is important to understand why Nietzsche, who by all accounts fought heroically, nonetheless lost the battle.

## Nietzsche: A "Great Indo-European"

Nietzsche's crusade against God was conducted on the terrain of Grammar. By recognizing the linguistic origin of conceptual categories, Nietzsche sought to deconstruct language in order to undermine the autonomy of grammatical categories. Following on from his study of Gerber, Hartmann and Steinthal's physiological interpretations on the origin of languages (Benes, 2006) Nietzsche deployed his own 'Dionysian materialism'(Sloterdijk,1981) against the central institutions of European morality and culture, which he claimed were but a result of the mystifications of Indo-European Grammars. It is worth elaborating this through a reconstruction of his philosophy of language. Drawing explicitly on Claudia Crawford's reconstruction (Crawford, 2011), Nietzsche's theory of language can be elaborated as follows:

1) Language is the result of an *unconscious* metaphorical process of communication. In that sense, the formulation and communication of words is secondary to an initial process of interpretation that takes place through the creation of images, generated by the nervous system in response to physical stimuli.

2) These images are articulated firstly through the use of non-grammatical sounds, gestures and movements, before being transposed into concepts and words. Language is the metaphor of a metaphor.

3) The unconscious formation of images is a creative process that is singular in each individual's case, prior to its communicability through language.

4) Linguistic and grammatical communication is the *conscious* use of language. This is a necessity rooted in the pressures and strictures of social life. The language of the community is therefore based on a series of metaphors which, having become conventions, take on the aura of truths and traditions.

5) The reification of language through its communicability (in the form of laws, customs, Grammar) in turn influences the unconscious processes of image formation and help shape an individual's world-view and physiological relationship to the word. Language therefore shapes the world as we come to 'know' it, because the way language is used and regulated determines what is knowable and orients our actions.

6) Critical thought and creative action are based on the ability to intervene in the unconscious process of metaphor formation. The task of the philosopher is to consciously communicate in ways other than conventional in order to change the course of socially ordered ways of life.

In light of this reconstruction, for Nietzsche an investigation into the origin of language is therefore also a genealogical account of how particular articulations of language in beliefs, customs and laws have come to regulate the way in which human beings act in the world. This entails more than just the conscious reshaping of language. Undermining the transparency of propositional linguistic communication depends on an understanding of language as a metaphorical phenomenon based on historically determined physiological interaction. Nietzsche's style and biographically inspired

method of philosophising is based on his intuition that real creativity consists in shaping one's unconscious process of metaphor formation by learning how to use language transformatively.

In Nietzsche's analysis, the linguistic history of humanity was thought to have been preserved through the structure of Indo-European linguistic classification (Nietzsche, 1966, 1967). It is through analysing the grammatical categories as they are generated through the classifications of historical languages that Nietzsche believed he could deduce the structure of thought from the laws of Grammar. The conceptual matrix and internal tensions of Ontology are to be sought within the structure of a historical Grammar: "The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is affinity of languages, it cannot fail owing to the common philosophy of Grammar- I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions-that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages (where the concept of the subject is least developed) look otherwise "into the world", and will be found on paths of thought different from those of Indo-Germanic peoples and the Muslims: the spell of certain grammatical functions is ultimately also the spell of physiological valuations and racial connotations" (Nietzsche, 1966, S20).

In his encounter with historical linguistics and his discovery of recently reconstructed 'Sanskrit' of ancient Aryan India, believed to be the origin of Indo-European languages, Nietzsche found within the structures of the Indo-European languages the conceptual apparatus that afforded European metaphysics with the ideas of 'subject and object', causality' and 'being'. In this way he claimed to have undermined notions of the autonomy of thought or cognition from language.

Nietzsche's error was to have taken all too seriously the proposition of an original Indo-European race. His literalisation of Darwinism forced his genealogy of culture to end up as a celebration of a so called primordial historical origin that is said to have existed prior to the invention of philosophical mystifications by the 'Grammarians' and 'metaphysicians' who by inventing causality and objectivity invent a God as an ultimate grammatical foundation. Nietzsche's call to 'Life' in order rebel against culture is a result of his adoption of modern biological categories and definitions of life which led him to posit it as a pre-linguistic foundation upon which culture rests: life becomes a bare minimal transformative principle. A non-defined, non-definable and non-conceptual -will-to-power that serves as an a-moral origin for the categories of morality. The myth

of an originary, hence superior, Aryan amoral race, conjured by the biologisation of the Indo-European historical hypothesis, is transposed into a metaphysical principle of an infinite creative life force with which Nietzsche called upon his readers to liberate themselves from the confines of "Judeo-Christian Nihilism" (See Bonfiglio, 2006 and Arvidsson,2006).

It is well known, however, that there never has been such a people as the Indo-Europeans (Agamben, 1996, Arvidson, 2006 Heller-Roazen, 2008). The etymological classification of languages is not historical in a chronological sense, but only in terms of the positing of a historical *arche* that, like in Aristotle's Ontology, makes the system function coherently. In fact, the uniqueness of historical linguistics lies in the fact that the "epistemology of Indo-European linguistics as a science of language is exclusively concerned with forms of speech that, by definition have never been attested as such; it defines the philological discipline as the study of an idiom that must always already, so to speak, have been forgotten" (Heller-Roazen 2008, 100).

This further exposes the theological impetus behind historical philology and reaffirms Agamben's and Nietzsche's suspicions of the connection between Grammar and theology. In ther following section of the chapter I will show how the hypothesis concerning a real existing spoken language and people that serve as an *arche* of contemporary European culture is a mystification brought about by the very nature in which the question of Indo-European linguistics was posed – a theologically inspired quest for the origin of language.

## Languages of Paradise

The relationship between linguistics and theology is reaffirmed by modern linguistics when scholars undertook to delineate the classification of historical languages. As Maurice Olender(1992) has shown, under the influence of Kirchner and Leibnitz's universal schemas that we encountered in the previous chapter, the development of historical linguistics, centred around the creation of the idea of an Indo-European language and society, was made possible due to an obsessive search by philosophers for the primal and first "language of paradise" (Olender, 1992). This ideological belief allowed for the construction of a pure genealogically derived language by scholars such as Ernest Jones, Bopp,

Adolphe Pictet, Humboldt and Renan, amongst others. These scholars believed that there existed an original primitive language belonging to whom they considered to be the earliest humans Originally thought to be Hebrew, the paradisical language changed to Sanskrit once the latter was discovered and analysed following the colonisation of India. Sanskrit was thought to contain similar structures and words to other European languages. Hebrew was then displaced to the category of a Semitic tongue paving way to the construction of Indo-European language spoken by an originary warrior Aryan race, which Europeans could claim to be inheritors of.

Despite the fact that historical linguistics emerged at the same time Hegel was compiling his Phenomenology of Spirit, the philosopher remained critical of the primitivist mythology. Olender shows how Hegel opted instead for a different, yet equally spurious, myth in which, updating and historicising the biopolitics of Aristotle, he transforms the theology of origins into "a history of the primal" (Olender, 1992,19). For Hegel, human beings begin to acquire knowledge sd meaningful semiotic and logical language as a result of a fall from grace and a loss of "animal innocence'. Hegel argues that "Eden is a garden in which only animals can live thereafter, not men" (Hegel in Olender, 1992, 10). Therefore, as he discussed in the Phenomenology of Knowledge, animality must pave the way to humanity which sacrifices its animal origin in its gradual progression, through dialectical linguistics, towards absolute knowledge (Hegel, 1966 and Kojeve 1068a and b).

Agamben confirms this analysis when he observes that "*in this perspective, the fact that the birth of comparative Grammar and the hypothesis about the Indo-European language are contemporary with Hegel's philosophy- that, actually, the last book of the Science of Logic was published in the same year (1816) as Franz Bopp's Konjunkstionsystem-is certainly not a mere coincidence. The Indo-European language-which linguists have reconstructed(or, rather, produced)through a careful morphological and phonological analysis of historical languages-is not a language homogenous to the others, or more ancient: it is something like an absolute langue that nobody ever spoke or will ever speak, but constitutes as such the historical and political a priori of the West, which guarantees the unity and the reciprocal intelligibility of its many languages and its many peoples*" (Agamben, 2018b,11).

From an Indo-European perspective, the redemption of humanity is tied to the realisation of its linguistic and cognitive destiny: "*Just as Hegel stated that the historical destiny of humanity had reached its fulfillment and that the historical potentialities of religion, art, and philosophy had been dissolved and realised in the absolute, so the process that had brought the West to full awareness of*

*the cognitive potentialities contained in its language culminated in the construction of the Indo-European language"*(Agamben, Ibid.).

The formalisation of a shared linguistic heritage for the peoples of Europe led philosophers like Herder, and in his wake Humboldt, to abandon the notion of a shared 'paradisical origin, preferring instead to nationalise the origins of languages as a unique structure of consciousness determining the spirit of each particular national culture – thus they saw "language as a testimony to the development of the human mind, a repository of civilization's discoveries" (Olender, 1992, 5) Despite the rejection of one originary language, the nationalisation of linguistics takes remains faithful to the idea that language is both a mirror of reality and a mirror of the unique past of each culture and hence the clue to historical development and classification of cultures.

What remains common to these thinkers, who searched for a language of paradise, whether in a primal tongue or in the form of an originary animality, is the theological belief in the providential power of language. The development and progress of humanity was said to br possible only due to its having resided in a biblically inspired origin, which authorised the power of language in the first place. Language remained, 'our' revealed truth, which could explain 'our' origin. Once again, language is both divine and yet nonetheless human. A divine gift which scholars were left to decipher. A contradiction emerged, in which, despite the fact that the Christian theology most Indo-European linguists still believed in, "sought to mark its progress by invoking the testimony of an immobilized witness" (Olender, 1992, 139), the One truth had manifested itself through a plurality of historical forms. The divine revelation, having only incarnated itself once in the body of Christ, now manifested itself through the plurality of tongues. Each national culture was able to create its own mythological origins (as Wagner did for Germany) or remain faithful to the originary dispensation of the Hebrew bible by covering it up and concealing it by displacing it onto a more originary race.

Olender shows how, to date, the contradictions of Indo-European linguistics have not been overcome, but merely transposed into structuralism. Hence the persistence of both typological and historical arguments that make up genealogical research. Historical linguistics could not decide if linguistic affinities were the result of "historical and geographical connections between peoples (with a consequent implication of systemic borrowings) or by the idea of descent form a common ancestor to account for the existence of common word roots and grammatical structures" (Olender, 1992,17). Despite these contradictions, following the success of comparative method, "*Linguistics became the pilot discipline for the human sciences between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its sudden*

*withering away and foundering in the work of Benveniste coincides with an epochal mutation in the historical destiny of the West. The West, which realised and brought to completion the potentiality it had inscribed in its language, must now open itself to a globalization that simultaneously marks its triumph and its end*" (Agamben, 2018b,12).

The historical mutation Agamben mentions is precisely what allowed for the transition from historical linguistics to structuralism. This occurred due to the fact that the historical reality of Indo-European as an originary language has been dismissed in favour of the scientific principle of a trans historical and reconstructed *arche*. With the fulfillment of historical linguistics in the construction of the system of Indo-European, linguistics abandons the search for a historical *arche* and transitioned to a structuralist and then post-structuralist analysis of language as a dual system of signification. The structuralist model, focusing as it does on language as a closed signifying system, lifts the linguistic system out of its historical dispensation and treats it as a finished fully operational system. The arbitrariness of the sign entails the self -referentiality of a system which no longer taking itself to present historical development, enshrines itself as the system that makes history possible – as a historian of Structuralism puts it "In this radical change of perspective, diachrony becomes a simple derivative and linguistic evolution is seen as the passage from one synchrony to another." (Dosse 1998, 48).

The transformation of linguistics was made possible by the conclusion of the elaboration of the Indo-European model; not through its failure but by its success and power. Structuralism heralds the 'end of history' whereby language operates and is analysed as a cybernetic system, to be finally internalised in the minds of the human beings in the form of Chomskyan 'generative Grammar'. The word of God is no longer to be found in the mists of time or the interpretation of scripture but in the very existence of language itself as a human 'gift' now finally truly incarnated within the human being. What Aristotle could only find as discrete letters located in the tongue is now a fully elaborated autonomous system of self-referential units lodged deep within the human cognitive apparatus. Unable to find its bearing through historical analysis, humanity allegedly enters a post-historical world where in order to understand itself it must rely only on the resources lodged within its 'genetic' or 'linguistic' code -and thus confines itself to increasing and infinite self-reference.

# The Semiotic Unconscious

Even the therapeutic sciences of the soul have not been spared the influence of semiotics. This is evident in both Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic method and theory. It is crucial to critically review the status of psychoanalysis in light of this fact. The discussion in this section does not claim to be exhaustive but it shows that insofar as it relies on the metaphysics of the sign, would seem to support, rather than critique, the domination of individuals by their own linguistic heritage.

All differences between them aside, both Freud and Lacan owe the coherence of their theories and practices to the semiotic paradigm. It was Benveniste himself who showed that whilst for both Lacan and Freud, the 'unconscious is structured like a language", what kind of language that is remains fundamentally different for both psychoanalysts (Benveniste,1973.) In fact, the distinction between them can best be explained as a difference in the reception and interpretation of semiotics. For both, the unconscious is modeled and structured like a language, as Lacan claimed (Rudinesco, 1997). Freud's method relies heavily on historical linguistics, which was a dominant paradigm in his time. Freud's biologism goes hand in hand with his reliance on the historical linguistics of Carl Abel (Benveniste, 1973, Machado, 2015). Lacan, emerging as a theorist and practitioner during the rise of Structuralism after the Second World War, embraced the mathematisation of science based on his reading of Koyre (Lacan,2006). Applying the Cartesian tradition of structuralism to the works of Saussure and Benveniste he develops an a-historical structural model of the unconscious (Rudinesco,1997). Freud can make an analogy between the unconscious fantasies and the early primitive phases of humanity because he proposes, following Abel, that the ambiguity of the meaning of words in dreams reveals the trace of primitive origins (Benveniste ,1973 and Machado,2015). Lacan dispenses with chronological fantasies and posits an a-historical model of a split subject, who is nothing but the gap between the semiotic and semantic, the bar between the two sides of the sign (See also Agamben,1993 and 1996) In Lacan, naturalistic explanations for the ambiguity of meaning within psychic phenomena are dispensed with and can be explained only already from within the structural linguistic system (Lacan, 2006 and Machado,2015). A similar analysis by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1973) has shown the total dependence of Lacan's practice on the structuralist paradigm he adopts. They show conclusively how "Lacan's subject is the subject of linguistics", leading the two to dub him a 'philosopher of the letter' (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, 1973).

Whatever the differences between Freud and Lacan, both remain faithful to the Indo-European schema; as a historical determining chronological model for Freud and as a structural a-historical vocabulary for Lacan. The model of a split language is reaffirmed with renewed vigour. Psychoanalytic knowledge, in all its forms, is dependent on the ability of one language to be translated another one, thought to be symptomatic of the first. The subject of knowledge is said to reveal itself as a result of a deciphering of its 'non-knowledge' which is the equivalent of a semiotic 'element' of language. Psychoanalysis depends on the existence of an entity or language that can only exist as an origin that cannot be spoken directly, but only spoken of as the foundation of another kind of speech: "*consider psychoanalysis, which has discovered its Es to be the subject of a knowledge that is not known; as well as structuralism, which has established structure to be an unconscious categorical knowledge without reference to any thinking subject; and linguistics, which has located in the phoneme a knowledge independent of the speaking subject – all resolutely signal towards an Other as the subject of knowledge*" (Agamben, 2017b, 72).

But the plausibility of a science that attempts to deduce knowledge from a knowledge that is claimed to be unknown depends in the last instance on the plausibility of the linguistic model that allows a shift from one of its registers to another. As we have seen, and as Benveniste (1973) himself showed before, this is not possible because: *"the semantic and the semiotic in language represent to closed worlds between which there is no passage, so there is a hiatus between knowledge of the Other and knowledge of the subject that cannot clearly be bridged. The Freudian program- according to which 'where Es was, the I should be'- cannot be realised if it is true that the I and the Other are in fact a necessary pair*." (Agamben, Ibid.). The incapacity of semiotics to constitute the unity of the sign except by way of eliminating the fracture between semantic and semiotic destines the psychoanalytic project to the same fate as the semiotic paradigm it relies on.

As I showed in this chapter, Indo-European Grammar is something that has never been spoken and relates a past that has never taken place and yet is taken to be an ever-present structural foundation within our language. A profound attempt to utilise this historical legacy was made by Martin Heidegger who subjected Ontology to a critical philological deconstruction for the sake of indigenizing European culture. Heidegger's fundamental Ontology aimed to liberate 'Europe' from the confines of nihilistic modernity through the restoration of the Ontological dimension of ancient philosophy. This was to take place through the search for a 'new origin' through the construction of a 'Grammar of finitude' which took place on the basis of the reanimation of Indo-European languages according to their true historical dimension. But a 'Grammar of finitude' remains a Grammar nonetheless. It is the limits and

ultimate failure of this project that forced Agamben to search for an alternative critical methodology and replace the Grammar of finitude with the philosophical archaeology. It is therefore important to examine Heidegger's thought in order to show the risks entailed in the attempt to restore Ontology to its 'historical' dimension. This is aim of the following chapter.

# Chapter 6

## The Grammar of Finitude

Without question, the contemporary philosopher most responsible for the modern reanimation of philosophy as Ontology is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophical efforts focused on the rehabilitation of the 'question of the meaning of being' as the fundamental question of philosophy, and hence as the fundamental question underpinning all of the Western sciences (Heidegger, 1962). Following Heidegger, it has become impossible to treat philosophical questions as merely logical or cognitive ones. Instead we recognize how any epistemology or anthropology is dependent on a more fundamental form of thinking – this type of thinking is what Heidegger called, following Aristotle – fundamental Ontology. That fundamental Ontology shows that in order to be able to say anything about the world one must first understand how it is that the world becomes sayable in the first place. From this follows the need to ask a second, equally fundamental question: what kind of being is the being that can say things about the world in such a way as to reveal it?

Heidegger's stature in our culture is due in a large part to the fact that through his philosophical analysis the possibility emerged that a radical element or current could be uncovered from the Western philosophical tradition. Heidegger devoted his philosophical career to trying to show that underneath the officially sanctioned tradition of Western thought and culture there existed a counter-current of philosophising which heralded the possibility of 'another beginning'.

Heidegger was always explicit about his influences and the excitement that he generates in his readers and followers regarding a particular figure from antiquity is in direct relation to the importance of that figure for his own thinking. Heidegger directly associates his own understanding of phenomenology with Aristotle's philosophy. For Heidegger, the possibility of the deconstruction and then revitalisation of tradition is dependent first and foremost on the possibilities of fundamental questioning that lay dormant within Aristotle's philosophy. Walter Brogan (2005) emphasises this point when discussing Heidegger's relationship to Aristotle. Brogan shows, what other scholars like Kiesel ( 1993) have documented in detail, that "Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle had a significant impact on Aristotle scholarship in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century, and

the controversial and revolutionary implications of his interpretations of Aristotle, and ancient Greek philosophy in general, continue to help shape the resurgence of interest in ancient Greek philosophy among continental philosophers today." (Brogan 2005,1). Brogan's analysis shows conclusively that Heidegger associated his own philosophy with that of Aristotle's and credited him as the most decisive influence on the development of fundamental Ontology. Due to Heidegger's claim that with Plato, philosophy emerges as a metaphysics of presence based on the forgetting of the Ontological difference, it is assumed that due to the fact that Aristotle was Plato's student and continued that project that he should be seen as an easy target for Heidegger's destruction of the tradition. Yet with Heidegger, the destruction of tradition occurs by way of revisionism that celebrates Aristotle as a genuine critic of metaphysics: "instead of a critique of Aristotle as the first metaphysician, Heidegger offers a persuasive and revolutionary rethinking of Aristotle's work, which he argues is more original and radical than that of his teacher Plato.

According to the truth that the most radical critic accomplishes their task through the most fanatical faithfulness to the imperatives of the system they critique then Heidegger's revisionism must be seen for what it is: a final insistence on the validity of the Greek metaphysical project as the unique heritage and contribution of European culture to the world. It is for this reason that a confrontation with the status of Ontology in our culture must proceed through a confrontation not only with Heidegger but directly with Aristotle's philosophy. It is this task that Agamben takes upon himself in his archaeology of Ontology, that aims to expose the limits of Heidegger's philosophy insofar as it takes up the Aristotelian legacy and repeats the same mistakes.

What the analysis reveals is that Heidegger does not manage to extract himself from the Aristotelian legacy I analysed in previous chapters. Despite the shift in Heidegger from an 'analytic of Dasein' to a 'history of Being', both projects are dependent on the transposition of speculative Grammar into a Grammar of finitude that rests on an unavoidable negativity.

Heidegger's attempt to 'liberate Grammar from logic' ultimately fails because he cannot advance beyond an intermingling of logical and grammatical categories that is fundamental to any Ontology conceived as history. In the end, the 'Ontological difference', does not make that much of a difference, and a 'Grammar of finitude' or a 'poetics of being' remain Grammars nonetheless. In line with the Nietzschean program we identified earlier, Agamben argues that the liberation of Grammar from logic must be in fact a *'liberation of language from Grammar', at the same time that it presupposes a critique of the interpretation of language that is already contained in the most elemental grammatical*

*categories – the concept of 'articulation', 'letter' and 'part of speech'."* (Agamben, 2006, Introduction).

## A Grammar of Everyday Life

In *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) Martin Heidegger expresses the ambition to reconstitute Fundamental Ontology on the basis of human finitude. The celebrated analysis of the moods and attunements of Da-Sein in *Being and Time* and the critique of propositional language are part of Heidegger's attempt to, in his own words, 'liberate language from logic':

"The Greeks had no word for "language"; they understood this phenomenon 'in the first instance' as discourse. But because they came into their philosophical ken primarily as assertion, this was the kind of logos which they took as their clue for working out the basic structures of the forms of discourse and its components. Grammar sought its foundations in the 'logic' of this logos. But this logic was based upon the Ontology of the present-at-hand. The basic stock of 'categories of signification', which passed over into the subsequent science of language, and which in principle is still accepted as the standard today, is oriented towards discourse as assertion. But if on the contrary we take this phenomenon to have in principle the primordiality and breadth of an existentiale, then there emerges the necessity of re-establishing the science of language on foundations which are Ontologically more primordial. The task of liberating Grammar from logic requires beforehand a positive understanding of the basic a priori structure of discourse in general as an existentiale." (Heidegger, 1962, 208).

For Heidegger, the ability to deconstruct Ontology is based on his displacement of Grammar from a speculative framework towards what he takes to be a Grammar of factical life. Heidegger's thought emerged from his interpretation and extensive knowledge of medieval scholasticism (McGrath, 2006). Despite his rejection of Catholicism for a form of Lutheranist inspired 'primitive christianity', Heidegger never overcame the association between being and Grammar that he picked up from scholastic Ontology, particularly Duns Scotus' reading of Aristotle.

Influenced by the 'Speculative Grammar' of the Aristotelian inspired Modistae (who also exercised a decisive influence on C.S Pierce), Duns Scotus and Thomas of Erfurt argued that Being could be fully

articulated through the grammatical categories: “Scotus and Erfurt share a proto-idealist assumption that identifies being (ens) with intelligibility (essentia) and knowing (scientia) with understanding (intellectus). The being of the thing is wholly intelligible—no act of existence remains outside of the light of essentia. Consequently, Ontology is fully reflected in language. Thus, in a quasi-transcendental move, Erfurt endeavours to prove how a complete account of modes of meaning coincides with a complete set of Ontological categories.” (McGrath, 2006, 90).

The belief in the complete articulation of being within the categories of Grammar gave birth to what the medieval scholars called a ‘speculative Grammar’ (Stewart,1986). This Grammar was : “a theory of signification, as a Grammatica speculativa or universal Grammar, for Scotus specifies (for any possible language) the most elementary grammatical categories of signifying objects and their properties by terms (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), and the a priori rules according to which these categories or their instances may be combined into more complex meaningful or signifying units, or semantically uninterpreted, but syntactically well-formed formulae.” (Stewart 1986, 4).

Heidegger criticised what he saw as a tendency of scholasticism to occlude actual and historical life from its consideration, due to the fact that in scholastic Ontology, derived from Aristotle, Being as a first cause is reduced to a non-historical origin from which all other categories of being are said to derive. From that vantage point “Factical life is interpreted in terms of non-factical eternity. Temporality is excluded from the discussion, and theology is substituted for the understanding native to life” (McGrath, 2006, 15). For this reason, Heidegger substitutes the a-temporal origin for the temporalized and historical ‘facticity’ and argues that being can only be conceived in relation to time rather than as a non-temporal foundation for it. Factical historical life is therefore termed by Heidegger ‘finitude’ (Heidegger,1962).

Heidegger’s method consists of developing an indicative phenomenology to replace the philosophy of consciousness centered around intentionality. Heidegger shows that from Scholasticism, through Descartes to Husserl, that phenomenological interpretation of the world has been caught in a paradigm of conscious intentionality. (See the analysis in McGrath, 2006). Consciousness becomes the medium or receptacle which enacts the act of intentionality and mediates knowledge of the world. For Heidegger, following on from his critique of scholasticism, intentionality is a mechanism that relies on a vapid subjectivisation that locks, as it were, the world within the individual thinker’s mind and abstracts from concrete experience. The analysis of factical life shows that intentionality owes its condition of possibility to an Ontological rather than epistemological relationship.

For Heidegger, Philosophy itself is this summoning of Being for the sake of a more radical understanding of beings. But that which allows an access to Being is always a counter movement, or negative moment that erupts out of preoccupations, and breaks us out, as it were of our taken for granted mood. Heidegger famously suggests therefore that it is through the experience of anxiety, boredom or the knowledge of mortality that we gain access to more primordial and fundamental experience.

Heidegger therefore critiques the metaphysics of consciousness by developing a Grammar of the way in which being is revealed Ontologically, historically and experientially without the mediation of the subject of abstract consciousness. The speculative Grammar shifts from serving as an articulation of transcendental entities to serving as a mechanism for deciphering, here and now, the historical and experiential reality of the human being. Central to the ability of Da-Sein to interpret its existence is the possibility to question the facticity of everyday life and taken for granted assumptions. The Aristotelian Ontological Apparatus is here reconfigured as an articulation not of transcendental causality or divine Grammar but as the ways of being in the world of a human being. The famed Ontological distinction between Being and beings come to the fore insofar as it is only by challenging our 'thrownness' through radical questioning can we gain access to Being and recognise the fundamental Ontological background to our ontic preoccupations.

Heidegger's temporalisation of Ontology results in an abandonment of speculative Grammar in favour of a Grammar of finitude. Yet, instead of Being toward God, the orientation toward the infinite which characterised the scholastic experience of religious life,– da-sein is reimagined as a being-toward-death – The Ontological horizon shifts from a non-temporal past or perpetual presence to a non-temporalisable future – death becomes the supreme horizon of meaning as a result of it spelling the total and absolute destruction of meaning for the finite and historical individual. Da-sein is a finite being that finds its finitude only as a result of comprehending its impossibility to be, which Heidegger famously nonetheless claims is actually the source of one's own possibility.
Why does the ultimate possibility of Da-Sein appear simultaneously as a negativity or impossibility? Brogan (2010), according to his general interpretive schema, refers us to Heidegger's indebtedness to Aristotle's conception of privation as *Steresis,* the foundation of the nothingness integral to Da-Sein's experience: "Heidegger says that the basic category of *steresis* dominates Aristotle's Ontology. *Steresis* means lack, privation. It can also mean loss or deprivation of something, as in the example of blindness, which is a loss of sight in one who by nature sees. *Steresis* can also mean confiscation,

the violent appropriation of something for oneself that belongs to another. Finally, Aristotle often calls that which is held as other in an opposition of contraries a privation. Heidegger will point out in his later essay on *Physics* B1 that Aristotle understands this deprivation as itself a kind of *eidos*. Thus, *steresis* is the lack that belongs intrinsically to being. According to Heidegger, with the notion of *steresis* Aristotle reaches the pinnacle of his thinking about being. Heidegger even remarks that Hegel's notion of negation needs to be returned to its dependency on Aristotle's more primordial conception of the not. In the context of Heidegger's discussion of privation and Ontological lack, it becomes clearer why Heidegger introduces a discussion of death and the finality of factical life in this 1922 essay on Aristotle. Factical life is such that its death is always somehow there for it, something that always stands in sight for it as an obstinate and uncircumventable prospect of life." (Brogan, 2010, 19).

If Brogan is correct, then what is the relation of Grammar to this negativity? It is crucial to understand why facticity appears as negativity, and how this negativity remains faithful to the Ontological correlation of being and Grammar in Heidegger's thought. Why does the singular factical human being gain access to fundamental reality through a Grammar that at the same time reveals a negativity?

Heidegger's response to this question is an attempt to break with Aristotle's theory of signification by overcoming semiotics in favour of an Ontological Grammar of facticity (Heidegger, 1962 and 1982). Looking to overcome the metaphysical interpretation of language as 'sign', Heidegger claims that "the essence of language conceived of in terms of such a view does not of itself show language in its essence: it does not show the way in which language essentially unfolds as language; that is, the way it perdures; that is, the way it remains gathered in what it grants itself on its own as language" (Heidegger, 1982, 118)

Breaking with the Aristotelian myth of articulation, language, for Heidegger, belongs to humans only insofar as they are not signifying beings but rather enter into the open that language reveals for them: it is the very possibility of having a world, over and above any possibility to say something about it. The intention and possibility of speaking is defined Ontologically as a condition of possibility for signification. Ontologically, and not sensually or physiologically, but only insofar as human beings gain access to a realm of originary speech – the Grammar of facticity.

This is why Heidegger defines human beings a Da-Sein, as beings that exist in a more originary realm prior to linguistic signification or representational knowledge. This realm is what Heidegger calls a

"mood" (*stimmung*) which is more originary and fundamental than any psychological state of mind, cognitively understood (Heidegger, 1962). Mood is a relation to world, as part of human being ascending to its place in language- into the "there" (Da). Agamben, following Spitzer's genealogy of the word 'stimmung' (Spitzer,1944) suggests that in light of its function as a critique of intentionality, mood, *stimmung* in German, should be stripped of all psychological significance. Instead the notion should be understood in its original musical/poetic sense as determining the manner in which human beings are held by language and the world - the rhythm that constrains and simultaneously moves them (See Agamben, 2006, 66-79).

Indeed, for Heidegger, this mood, this holding, whilst manifesting through embodied experience of anxiety or boredom, is simultaneously a form of a linguistic opening: the being 'there' (Da-Sein) of humans, which Heidegger argues we are always already thrown in and delivered over to against our will. But this Grammar, this 'Da', whilst transcending semiotics, retains the structure of the Ontological apparatus.In his *Introduction to Metaphysics,* Heidegger takes Aristotle to task for obscuring the originary dimension of logos as 'unconcealment' in favour of propositional speech: "Initially *logos* as gathering *is* the happening of unconcealment, grounded in concealment and in service to it. Now *logos* as statement becomes the locus of truth in the sense of correctness. And this process culminates in Aristotle's principle that logos as statement is that which can be true and false. Truth that was originally unconcealment, a happening of the dominant being itself and governed by gathering, now becomes the property of *logos" (*Heidegger 2014, 207*).*

David White points out that by highlighting the dependence of propositional truth on a prior Ontological dimension, Heidegger attempts to undermine the principle of non-contradiction as an adequate explanation of truth (White,1986). But the price Heidegger pays for going back behind the law that makes formal logic itself possible is to introduce contradiction in the very fabric of being itself. Negation is now located within Being and not simply a function of logical analysis. Being can be said to both be and to not be, because negation is inherent to it.

Recently, a prominent logician developed his own interpretation of Heidegger's Ontology as a 'Grammar of being' (Priest, 2001). Graham Priest shows the importance of grammatical considerations in the articulation of fundamental Ontology. However, seeking to reconcile Ontology with a renewed theory of logic that goes beyond the law of non-contradiction, Priest subsumes Heidegger's philosophy into an Analytics of Grammar. Priest assumes that Heidegger's critique of Logic was based only on the apparent inability of logical categories to describe Being without falling

into contradiction. Therefore, apparently Heidegger rejects any theory dependent on the law of non-contradiction. Priest therefore concludes that a renewed logical Ontology, overcoming the paradoxes of classical logic, will enable us to reconcile fundamental Ontology with logical analysis, to reconcile *alethea* with propositional truth. It is not our intention to assess the plausibility or merit of Priest's "Dialethia" as a logical paradigm. What is important to note is that Heidegger's critique of 'presence' was not undertaken due to the need to resolve purely logical questions, but with the intention to recover a 'negative' dimension of human experience obfuscated by abstraction (Heidegger, 2014). The ontological difference does not need to be affirmed within a system that allows for 'true contradictions', because it was never intended as a rejection of logical justification but as an indication of a dimension of meaning prior to logical representation and analysis.

For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the transcendence of Da-Sein revealed through anxiety and the possibility of death was the guarantee of an opening to a more originary Ontological experience. In the latter Heidegger, Truth as un-concealment – *aletheia* - is taken out of the hands of Da-Sein and its anxiety and shifted onto language itself as 'arche' now conceived of as the realm of epochal opening. This is meant to shift Ontology even further beyond the horizon of 'presence' and substance, or any dependence on a human mood, into a more originary experience of truth and world. Language itself, now the 'house of being' points towards an opening that human beings are to safeguard as 'shepherds of being'. And yet, if this shift is dependent in essence on the exchange between 'prote ousia' as substance into a 'prote ousia as historical *arche*, is there really an overcoming of 'classical metaphysics in this shift? Or does Heidegger's Ontology remain caught up in the apparatus that he inherits from Aristotle?

It is here that Agamben's analysis and critique of Heidegger finds its proper context. Agamben endeavours to show that, whether conceived of as an 'analytic of Da-Sein' or in the later Heidegger, as an 'epochal destiny', Heidegger's Ontology remains captive to the apparatus it inherits and radicalizes. Heidegger retains the identification of being with Grammar and retains the distinction between two split realms of existence, now reconfigured as Ontological and Ontic. Regardless of his strategy, Heidegger's philosophy captures the living human being within the machinations of Grammar as historical destiny and thereby fails in its task to liberate human beings from the Ontological Apparatus.

Fundamental Ontology is not just a Grammar of being but a Grammar of finitude. This means that truth is 'revealed' by shifting the plain of Grammar from propositions to an alleged prior dimension

of meaning. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, Fundamental Ontology remains a grammatology due to the insistence that human existence can be articulated only through the revealing power of self-referential Grammar.

It is to this analysis we now turn.

## Dying for Grammar

Agamben's critique of Heidegger's philosophy is deployed over his entire corpus. The distance Agamben establishes between himself and his former teacher is perhaps the most revealing locus in his work to assess his own philosophical intentions. Insofar as it is through the overcoming of the limitations we observe in our masters that we emerge into independence, an analysis of the way in which Agamben takes leave of his own master will in turn afford the best opportunity for a confrontation with his own reformulation of Ontology in our final chapter.

Agamben's critique centres around the fact that Heidegger chooses to designate the protagonist of his analysis in terms of a Grammar of finitude - as Da-Sein – Being-'There'. Why are human beings referred to as a being-*there*'? What is the meaning of the indicative pronoun 'there '(Da) insofar as it determines the nature of human beings as Ontological and not merely ontic beings, that have special access to a negativity?

Agamben's extensive analysis of the relation between language and negativity (Agamben 2006) begins by pointing out that it was Heidegger himself who raised this question without being able to provide a satisfactory answer. This 'failure' is therefore the ultimate limit of his thought.

Even after his alleged 'turn' away from the analytic of Da-sein to an epochal understanding of Being, Heidegger, repeating a metaphysical trope shared by Christian theology and German Idealism, explicitly stated that "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us but remains unthought. It can, however, beckon us toward the way in which the nature of language

draws us into its concern, and so relates us to itself, in case death belongs together with what reaches out for us, touches us" (Heidegger, 1971, 107-8).

Agamben asks why is it that the definition of human beings as speaking beings also entails at the same time a definition of them as mortal? (Agamben, 2006 Introduction). In Aristotle the relationship between human beings and language was determined on the basis of the encryption of letters within the voice, at the price of the exclusion of the natural life of human beings. Grounding the relationship between language and life on the isolation of 'vegetative life' this operation is a biopolitical and sovereign one insofar as it also determines the border between political and non-political life, truth and nonsense, human and non-human, living well and 'merely living.

In Heidegger this entire set of distinctions is retained but re-appears as an indication of the explicit mortality of human beings: language is the reason why human beings 'die' and not merely 'perish'. This occurs because Heidegger locates the opening of language to the world within indicative pronouns -the particles of language that since the invention of Grammar have been taken to indicate the very 'taking place of language". Pronouns are the parts of speech that assure the relationship between language and the world of the speaker and hence are also said to resolve the paradox of self-reference by in fact allowing for an existential relation of the world.

When Heidegger claims Da-Sein as the central category of his thought it is therefore to be understood as Being-the-there-, human beings gain access to their mortality by taking up a place within the *'there'*. Agamben argues that *"If this is true, if being its own Da (its own there) is what characterises Da-Sein (Being-There) this signifies that precisely at the point where the possibility of being Da, of being at home in one's own place is actualized, through the expression of death, in the most authentic mode, the Da is finally revealed as the source from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges. There is something in the little word Da that nullifies and introduces negation into that entity- the human – which has to be its Da. Negativity reaches Dasein from its very Da*" (Agamben, 2006, 5).

The Da, the "there" is a shifter that indicates the taking place of language- a self-referential performative particle. This is why, discovering our rhythm means for Heidegger, losing our voice. We are always already "thrown" into discourse: "*in other words, Dasein is located in the place of language without being brought there of its own voice, and language always already anticipates*

*Dasein, because it stays without voice in the place of language*". (Agamben, 2006, 56) This is why, Agamben concludes, the experience of language in mood is an experience of fundamental negativity.

This explains the centrality of anxiety, which operates as the most fundamental mood in Heidegger's analytic of Dasein. Anxiety, the indiscriminate and overwhelming feeling of dread of anything and everything- and hence of nothing in particular-is for Heidegger the experience of the disclosure of the nothingness which is the taking place of language. Human being is Da-Sein, is the "there" which indicates language itself insofar as it is seized by an unspeakable and inexplicable terror. A terror which Heidegger defines as the very experience of being (Heidegger, 1962).

And yet, Agamben asks *"But where does Da derive its nullifying power? Can we truly understand the expression Dasein, Being-the-Da, before we have answered this question? Where is Da, if one who remains in its clearing (lichtung) is, for that reasons the 'placeholder of nothing'. And how does this negativity, which permeates Dasein from top to bottom, differ from the negativity we find throughout the history of modern philosophy*?" (Agamben, 2006, 5).

For Brogan, Heidegger is drawing on Aristotle's concept of '*steresis*' when discussing lack and privation (Brogan, 2010). In Agamben this lack appears through the adoption of the indicative pronoun 'Da' as the place of nothingness. The critique of Heidegger that is developed in the analysis in *Language and Death* (Agamben 2006*)* focuses on exposing how Fundamental Ontology relies on precisely such a negativity in order to ground the analytic of Da-Sein. This is why Fundamental Ontology can be renamed a Grammar of finitude.

What is the relationship between nothingness and pronouns such that privation can be said to 'express itself' through language? Let us first examine the meaning and function of pronouns which, since their isolation as parts of speech in ancient grammatical speculation, have served as particles that indicate the 'taking place of language' – that which enables self-reference.

# Transcendental Pronouns: Shifting Ground

The Stoics were the first to isolate something like a pronoun and established the meaning of the term 'deixis': the indication of a word that is totally dependent on its context and use and without which has no meaning in itself. (Agamben, 2006) When in the second century, pronouns are seen to indicate the nature of the 'first substance' (prote ousia) the stage was set for the total separation of the pronoun from other parts of speech culminating in the identification of pronouns with 'pure being'.

With the development of medieval logic, following Aristotle's categories, the transcendental words and categories that define the reality of god as pure being (for St. Thomas Aquinas these were: res, unum, aliquid, bonum, verum – ) are believed to be pronouns, *that which is presupposed by any knowledge –" these words were called 'transcendentals' because they cannot be contained in or defined by any higher category. As such they constitute the maxima scibilia, that which is always already known and said in any received or named object and beyond which nothing can be predicated or known*" (Agamben,2006, 21). The transcendentals themselves, as listed by Aquinas, are then split into a first transcendental (ens or res) which is said to be predicated by every predication – and the remaining list which, like the rest of the categories, signify what is able to be said about anything insofar as it is demonstrable.

The emptiness or transcendental nature of the pronoun means that in order for it to signify it must be said to somehow relate to other parts of speech (Benveniste, 1973). In the next section I show how it is to this problem that we owe the distinction within linguistics and philosophy between showing and saying, first articulated as a distinction between 'demonstration; and 'indication. The pronoun is a part of speech that 'indicates' pure being. In order to enact this pure being, a series of 'demonstrations' are required which articulate the pronoun through the other parts of speech. Pronouns then play the role of indicating the shift between showing and saying – by allowing the transition between an empty self-referential transcendental and its being in speech. Pronouns indicate pure being and at the same time allow for its 'categorisation' or 'articulation' through nouns, verbs, adjectives and further temporal and spatial determinations.

In modern linguistics the pronoun is classified by Benveniste as an ‘indicator of the utterance’ and by Jakobson as ‘shifter’ (Agamben 1991). At the centre of Benvensite’s critique of Saussure is, as is to be expected, a meditation on the nature of the pronoun which plays a central role on the formulation of his theory of discourse (Benveniste,1966). Pronouns, and other indicatives of time and space like ‘here’ or ‘there’ are particles of speech which indicate the taking place of discourse – they are not terms that refer to an objective reality but simply to the presence of a speaker at the instant in which they assume a place within language.

As Benvensite explains: “What is the reality to which ‘I’ or you refers? Only a ‘reality of discourse’ that is something quite singular. ‘I’ can only be defined in terms of ‘locutions’ not in objective terms, as is possible for nominal sign. ‘I’ signifies “the person who utters the present instance of discourse containing ‘I’. By definition an instance in unique and valid only in its uniqueness…This constant and necessary reference to the instance of discourse constitutes the move that unites I/you with a series of “indicators’ that, because of the form and their combinatorial possibilities, belong to different classes. Some are pronouns, some adverbs, still others adverbial locutions… “This” will be the object designated through demonstration that is simultaneous with the present instance of discourse, “here” and “now” delimit the spatial and temporal instance that is coextensive and contemporaneous with the present instance of discourse containing ‘I’” (Benveniste 1966, 252-253).

In this context, the relationship between indication, the first, or transcendental, level of meaning isolated by medieval Grammarians, and shifters becomes clearer. The modern linguist shifts the place of the transcendental away from divinity onto a Grammar of finitude that reflects the reality of language itself : “There is no point in defining these terms and demonstratives in general through deixis, as is the usual practice, if we do not add that deixis is contemporaneous with the instance of discourse that bears the indication of the person; from this reference the demonstrative derives its unique and particular character, which is the unity of the instance of discourse to which it refers. Thus, the essential thing is the relation between the indicator (of a person, a place, a time, a demonstrated object, etc.) and the present instance of discourse. In fact, as soon as, through the same expression, this relation of the indicator to the single instance that reveals it is no longer in sight, language looks to a series of distinct terms that correspond symmetrically to the first. These no longer refer to the instance of discourse, but to real objects, times and ‘historical” places. Hence the correlatives: I; he; here; now; then; today; that; same day; (Benveniste, 1966, 253).

Pronouns are empty signs that only become 'full'; once they are taken up by a living speaker. Jakobson rounds out Benveniste's analysis by christening indicatives as 'shifters' insofar as they allow for an articulation of the passage between the semiotic and semantic parts of language (Moses,2004). Shifters are the linguistic particle which must be presupposed in any semantic utterance over and above any content, yet not able to be utilised outside of that same context. The modern definitions express exactly what the medieval Grammarians had attempted to in their discussion of transcendentals and show that "*the proper meaning of pronouns – as shifters and indicators of the utterance- is inseparable from a reference to the instance of discourse. The articulation- the shifting-that they effect is not from the non-linguistic to the linguistic but from langue to parole. Deixis, or indication-with which their peculiar character has been identified, from antiquity on – does not simply demonstrate an unnamed object, but above all the very instance of discourse, its taking place. The place indicated by the 'demonstratio', and from which every other indication is possible, is a place of language. Indication is the category within which language refers to its own taking place"* (Agamben, 2006, 21-23).

Benveniste's analysis of the utterance of pronouns extends to show that what is taken up by a speaker uttering a shifter is the creation of a lexical reality which indicates personhood, space and time. The shifters are performative indications that create a reality (I am the person speaking now) insofar as they name it. What is revealed here is that the instance of linguistic self-reference indicated by pronouns and shifters is the same as the instance in which language claims to refer itself to the highest sphere of meaning of existence. This sphere is named at times 'pure being', 'transcendentals' or the 'name of god' and in modernity the 'subject' of the pronoun. It is this indication of Ontological foundation that allows language to claim that it refers to and at the same time creates a world. Therefore "*only because language permits a reference to its own instance through shifters, something like being and the world are open to speculation. The transcendence of being and of the world- which medieval logic grasped under the rubric of transcendentia and which Heidegger identifies as the fundamental structure of being-in-the-world- is the transcendence of the event of language with respect to that which, in this event, is said and signified: and the shifters, which indicate the pure instance of discourse, constitute the originary linguistic structure of transcendence*"(Agamben, Ibid.).

We can see why Agamben centres his analysis around the fact that in modern philosophy, linguistics is prior to cognition (Agamben, 1991, 1993). The first-person pronoun serves as the foundation of knowledge from Descartes to Husserl and phenomenology owes it coherence to a grammatical reflection on the nature of the pronoun 'I'. It is important to point out the linguistic dimension of

modern epistemology, which cannot be ignored if we wish to understand its dependence on the Ontological apparatus. Understanding why Heidegger, despite his critique of metaphysics, still resorts in the last instance to an indicative pronoun will become clearer if we trace the itinerary of the first-person pronoun from Descartes to Husserl until its dissolution in Derrida's Grammatology.

## Nihilo Ergo Sum

In Descartes (1985) philosophy the *cogito* contains reference to the first-person pronoun, as that which thinks; the 'I' thinks, therefore it is.. It is worth recalling that Descartes sets up the philosophical experiment designed to deduce the cogito as a kind of spiritual exercise, described through a series of Meditations, through which the reader is asked to follow him in purging himself and reaching the true reality that will guarantee his certitude. (See the analysis in Hadot, 2004). According to Agamben (1996) and Pierre Hadot's (2004) interpretations the Cogito is nothing but the internalisation of the theological supreme being as a foundation for knowledge, reconstituted as the property of a thinking 'subject'. The emptying out of the self in the form of a pure self referentiality of a pronoun recalls the mystical process of stripping the soul of all its attributes in order to reach its incorruptible moral centre- the point of unification with God and moral law. Descartes empties himself into the pronoun in order to transform himself into an extended body, into a zero point where matter and mind meet without touching, evoking the mystical experience of 'synderesis'. Agamben summarises this process by identifying the cogito with the mystical meditation on the pronoun and offers an interpretation of Descartes that returns his philosophy to the speculative grammatical tradition it emerges from: "*the cogito, like mystical synderesis, is what remains of the soul when, at the end of the 'dark night', it is stripped of its attributes and content. The heart of this transcendental experience of the I has been signally described by an Arab mystic Al-Hallaj: 'I am I and the attributes are no more; I am I and the qualifications are no more…I am the pure subject of the verb*" (Agamben, 1996, 34). The unification and isolation of a thinking ego as a foundation for knowledge is generated through the internalisation of the pure mystical being of medieval Grammar.

In his 'Metacritique on the Purism of Reason', Hamman (2007) had already exposed the complete dependency of Kant's transcendental philosophy on the categories of Grammar. Indeed, Kant's critical philosophy effects an epistemological/cognitive transposition of Aristotle's categories away

from ontological indicators of 'Being' into transcendental categories of human cognition. The cognitivisation of Ontology results in its transformation into a logical epistemology (Kant, 1988).

But the attempt to purify concepts from language retains the structure of Ontological doubling. The linguistic split between first essence and its categories, or between the transcendentals and their demonstration is recapitulated in terms of the split between a transcendental subject' which is dependent on knowledge a-priori generated by the experience of space and time and the logical categories, and on the other hand an empirical subject beset by the laws of cause and effect of the natural world. Unsurprisingly the relation between the two subjects or realms of experience is left unexplained. Instead Kant offers a 'transcendental deduction' which operates as a translation or transposition of one realm into the other – a 'shifter' that like a pronoun allows the transcendental experience to synthesis the sensory experience coming from nature. The transcendental deduction is required due to the inability of a split Ontology to explain how transcendental and empirical realities relate to the one another. What was separated Ontologically can only be brought together through a logical apparatus of deduction, which upon reading Kant's work proves to be an extremely fraught procedure, which the philosopher himself could never entirely justify without recourse to mystical invocations. (See also the analysis by Agamben, 1966 and Lafont, 1999).

Repeating Hamman's move against Kantian philosophy, Derrida (1976) subjected Husserl's phenomenology, along with any philosophy of consciousness, to a detailed critique, exposing, the dependence of the ideality of meaning and consciousness on a prior linguistic apparatus of signification. Husserl took up the epistemological transformation of Ontology that Kant believed he had accomplished and attempted to develop a phenomenology of intentionality on its basis. He did so by isolating the mechanism of ideal and transcendental subjectivity for this purpose. Along the lines of Heidegger's critique of 'presence' as the guiding theme and presupposed foundation for scientific knowledge, Derrida mobilises a linguistic deconstruction of the priority of consciousness as a mechanism of intentionality. Derrida takes his interpretation of linguistic signification from the structuralism of Saussure. DB Allison (2005) sheds light on Derrida's work from this perspective in a lengthy elaboration that adds to the critique I developed chapter 4: "As a consequence of his reliance on an interpretation of structuralist linguistics Derrida maintains that linguistic meaning is not so much the product of an explicit meaning *intention* as it is the *arbitrary* configuration of *differences between* signs…There is no meaning, no signified content, that stands above and is free from this play of differences. Nor could meaning withstand the continuous shifting of differences, the continuous sedimenting of traces, as some *ideal identity*. For Derrida, there is only a likeness or sameness to

meaning, which is constituted across the history of ever-changing usage.What is striking about Derrida's claim is the objection that linguistic meaning can never be completely present, either in itself or as the content of consciousness. There can never be an absolutely signified content, an absolutely identical or uni-vocal meaning in language. All these values are denied to meaning once we admit its dependence upon nonpresent elements. Meaning can never be isolated or held in abstraction from its context, e.g., its linguistic, semiotic, or historical context. Each such context is itself a system of reference, a system of signifiers, whose function and reality point beyond the present. What is signified in the present, then, necessarily refers to the differentiating and nonpresent system of signifiers in its very meaning. We can only assemble and recall the traces of what went before: we stand within language, not outside it." (Allison 2005, 97-98).

Derrida's critique signifies the resumption of the linguistic dimension of Ontology that was safeguarded by the romantic critics of Kant and brought to the fore powerfully by Heidegger. But as I demonstrated in Chapter 4, Agamben sees the Deconstructionist move and raises it. Yes, the self-presence of consciousness is derivative of linguistic signification. But what about linguistic signification as such? What about the theory of the sign that determines the arbitrariness of meaning and its infinite deferral or 'writability'?

Despite Derrida's insistence that writing is not a representation of speech, his grammatological project tries to establish that speech is always itself writeable; writing is not 'representational for Derrida' because speech is not itself separable from it. It is not an original indication of presence that constitutes metaphysics. Rather, as our analysis of shifters and transcendentals has shown, it is the indication of the taking place of language through self-reference that constitutes the founding and grounding element of metaphysical speculation in its form as a Grammar of being : "*the dimension of meaning of the word 'being', whose eternal quest and eternal loss constitute the history of metaphysics, coincides with the taking place of language; metaphysics is that experience of language, that, in every speech act, grasps the disclosure of that dimension, and in all speech, experiences above all the 'marvel' that language exists*"(Agamben, 2006, 25). Insofar as this 'marvel' or 'wonder' at the existence of language takes place it is due to the ability of language to split itself in order to indicate its own relationship to the world through self-reference. That is, not through the indication of a substance but of an empty place which awaits to be taken up by an utterance by a living being. Metaphysics is, in the first and last instance, the evocation of a pure emptiness and a negativity which is only ever temporarily occupied and filled. Therefore, it is inadequate to counter the assumption of

full presence with a metaphysics of infinite semiotic displacement. The paradox of self-reference is in this way only overcome when it dissolves into an Ontology of nothingness.

## Ontological Distinction as a Grammar of Finitude

The relationship between fundamental Ontology and Indo- European linguistics was the subject of an important debate between Johannes Lohmann and Joseph Kockelmans (1972), two of the most important Heideggerian scholars who devoted their efforts to the analysis of Heidegger's linguistics. Lohmann's celebrated analysis attempted to demonstrate the dependency of the ontological-distinction on the structure of Indo-European languages which are oriented around the explicit assertive/existensive use of the verb 'to be'. He does so precisely by highlighting the presuppositional structure of Aristotleian Ontology and its dissemination into the indo-european Grammars, which we have already examined. Heidegger's distinction between an Ontological Being and the ontic manifestations of beings, is in this way a radicalisation, but not a departure from, the Ontological apparatus which separates the 'prote ousia' as a root form from its predicates or word endings (See Lohmann, 1972).

It is true that for Heidegger 'Being' is not conceived of as a substance. In 'On the Essence of Ground'(Heideger1968) it holds the place of an *arche* that serves as an opening to the world, or a transcendence that allows for language to develop as a form of signification through its system of predicates. In this way Lohmann wishes to highlight the importance of Indo-European languages, which due to their Ontological explicitness, serve as indexes of philosophical superiority. Kockelmans (1972) argues that in the later Heidegger the relationship between human beings and language shifts to a register which transcends the specificity of any historical language, thus extending the eopchality of being to all human cultures and subsuming them under the destiny of metaphysics. Whilst Indo-European languages manifest the presuppositional structure explicitly, this structure is said to take place implicitly in all languages thereby granting all human languages the distinction of Ontological openings.

What this means is that different languages reveal different elements of the world, the alleged explicitness of Indo-European languages in terms of the Ontological difference, is not a natural

mysterious fact but the result of the way in which those languages were constructed historically. These languages reveal only what they were intended to show by the countless scholars and Grammarians and linguists who formalised the Grammars of ancient Greek, Latin and in the modern age the grand project of Indo-European linguistics. As I demonstrated in a previous chapter, historical linguistics was founded on the assumption of a similarity between Sanskrit and European languages. The Ontological difference is the consequence of a specific articulation of Being through a language. This articulation is something that in and of itself must be examined historically and practically, rather than taken at face value as the indication of the superiority of one language group or historical epoch over another.

If Kockelmans wishes to exonerate fundamental Ontology from its cultural specificity and absolve Heideggerianism from its reliance on cultural specificity, he does so at the price of affirming even more strongly the Ontological relationship between language and world the enables fundamental Ontology to cohere as a programme. Kockelmans does this when he considers why Heidegger never explicitly thematises the relationship between the Ontological difference and his philosophy of language. He claims that this is articulated by Heidegger in the form of a shift or 'turn' away from the transcendence of Da-Sein to a theory of the History of Being: the articulation of the epochal openings of Being as historical relationships to the world. For Kockelmans, this was Heidegger's intention all along from the earliest drafts of Being and Time: "When Heidegger uses the term "Ontological difference" in this context to refer to the basic theme for thought, it is not his intention to refer to the ambivalence that has been the source of confusion in metaphysics for so many centuries. He intends, rather, to refer to a more fundamental difference between Being taken as the original process of unconcealment and beings taken as things that have their proper modes of Being and, thus, their meaning. The proposal to ground metaphysics by examining the meaning of Being as the process of unconcealment through which the Ontological difference between Being and beings taken in the sense just indicated comes about has been Heidegger's concern from the very first page of *Being and Time.*To ground metaphysics in this way necessarily means to transcend it, to pass beyond it; classical metaphysics, by reason of its forgottenness of the genuine meaning of the Ontological difference and, thus, because of the ambiguity connected with it, is unable to meditate the Being process, which is the ground" (Kockelmans,1972,206).

# The Grammar of Therapy

Based on the analysis above we can answer the question why Heidegger, despite his insistence on developing an analytic of finitude based around the real experiences of the embodied historical living being, resorts instead to a Grammar of finitude that is centred around the shifter 'Da' (There). For Fundamental Ontology, the relationship of human beings to the world is revealed only insofar as they exist within a Grammar; only insofar as they can take a position within the gap between semiotic and semantic that indicates self-reference. It is therefore clear that the experience of negativity in the form of anxiety, death and boredom that Heidegger takes as Ontological markers are very far from being 'finite' but rather open up a dimension of transcendence that Heidegger, faithful to the notion of Ontology as Grammar, transposes onto extreme and over powering worldly experiences. The Analytic of Dasein is a Grammar of Finitude and remains dependent on the linguistic apparatus that Heidegger revives from the scholastic interpreters of Aristotle.

When Heidegger replaces the Grammar of transcendence with one of temporal finitude, he introduces temporality into being itself, rather than taking it is a function of formal linguistic propositions. If the analysis I am pursuing is correct, this is possible for Heidegger not as a result of mysteriosuly uncovering a separate Ontological dimension, but because he shifts the meaning of deictic pronouns from indicating divinity to indicating human mortality. The over estimation of anxiety and boredom as significant experiences which reveal a human reality makes philosophical sense only in this context. Heidegger's 'moods' are given Ontological priority as a result of being revealed out of the 'Da' of language. The analytic of finitude can only achieve such fundamental status as a result of its reliance on a grammatical apparatus. That means that for Heidegger, being can be temporalised only because it is fundamentally grammaticisible

In recent decades, following Heidegger's own cooperation with Swiss physician Medard Boss (See Heidegger,1987) existential therapy has branched off into self-styled 'Daseinsanalysis' which aims to mobilise Heidegger's analytic of Dasein and its moods for the sake of psychotherapeutic treatment. Whether in Boss himself, the work of Stolorow or of Alice Holzhey-Kunz, the current President of the Institute of Dasaeinsanalysis, the experience of anxiety is taken to be of profound Ontological and therapeutic significance. This is justified on the basis that anxiety is an 'Ontological' experience that reveals a more fundamentaly the way that each client manages their being-

in-the-world. In a recent text Holzhey Kunz goes so far as to refer to anxiety as the premier 'philosophical' experience, thereby completely assimilating Heidegger's thought into a philosophical therapy (Holzhey-Kunz,2014).

Despite the profound efforts of practitioners and scholars to develop a powerful counter to psychoanalysis and offer at times crucial therapeutic interventions, it must be pointed out that in the central theoretical texts of specifically Heideggerian therapy (including the discussions between Heidegger himself and Medard Boss at Zolikon) one cannot find a discussion of the linguistic dimension of Heidegger's Ontology (see Holzhey-Kunz 2014, Boss 1982 and 1977, May 2015, Binswanger 1975) As a result, Existential therapy seemingly fails to account for the total dependence of the 'analytic of finitude' on a Grammar.

## Epochal Nothingness

Heidegger abandoned the analytic of finitude in favour of an 'epochal' Ontology of being that attempts to overcome the shortcomings of his previous articulation following his own experience of personal breakdown; his own experience of being the 'lieutenant of the nothing' (Mitchell, 2016). For Heidegger himself, the experience of radical nothingness required a shift away from the doctrine of 'moods' towards a historical ontology. In light of this, it would be wise to re-evaluate the meaning of the thesis that only through experiencing the negative can living human beings access the 'truth' of their existence.

What kind of 'truth' does the negative offer up for human beings once the doctrine of anxiety is replaced by an epochal and historical ontology? Beginning from "*On the Essence of Ground*" (Heidegger, 1998) Heidegger seeks to replace Da-Sein as an Ontological articulator, in favour of the very existence of language itself, independent from its speakers. He does so by explicitly reverting back to the distinction Aristotle drew between '*arche'*-that which is presupposed, and its predicates. The Ontological dimension is reflected as a 'ground' that serves as an epochal opening emerging from the historical movement of Being/Language itself. Heidegger's ability to posit an Ontological horizon for different epochs is premised precisely on the distinction between Ground and Causality that he claims to recover from Aristotle. Kockelmans helps explain this point: "According to Heidegger, the

problem of ground arose for Aristotle in two different but somehow connected forms—namely, as *arche* and as *aition.* Aristotle understands *arche* as that by which a being *is* (ground of the whatness of a being), that by which a thing *becomes* (ground of its thatness), or that by which a thing *is known* (ground of its truth). In the realm of *aition,* on the other hand, there are four types of ground. Heidegger claims that, in Aristotle, the relationship between these two different types of ground is obscure and that the common denominator of all these types of ground taken as one is more obscure yet." **(**Kockelmans, 1972, 195).

It is this obscurity that Heidegger sets out to reveal. When in *'Letter on Humanism'* (Heidegger, 1993) he wishes to define human beings as 'shepherds of being' he does so by rejecting any substantive definition of mankind on the basis of either its 'animalitas' or 'humanitas', that is, on the basis of either natural causality or on the basis of a substantive definition. Instead, human beings are those beings "whose essence lies in their existence" (Heidegger,1962) understood here as the "Da" that reveals Being. The transcendence showed here, shifts away from the 'Da' as negativity revealed in moods and instead is replaced by a transcendence that is afforded by the temporal nature of Being itself as language – what Heidegger calls a destinal sending: "Ek-sistence, thought in terms of ecstasis, does not coincide with *existentia* in either form or content. In terms of content ek-sistence means standing out into the truth of being. *Eksistentia* (existence) means in contrast *actualitas,* actuality as opposed to mere possibility as Idea. Ek-sistence identifies the determination of what the human being is in the destiny of truth. *Existentia* is the name for the realization of something that is as it appears in its Idea. The sentence "The Man ek-sists" is not an answer to the question of whether the human being actually is or not; rather, it responds to the question concerning the man's "essence." We are accustomed to posing this question with equal impropriety whether we ask what man is or who he is. For in the *Who?* or the *What?* we are already on the lookout for something like a person or an object. But the personal no less than the objective misses and misconstrues the essential unfolding of ek-sistence in the history of Being. That is why the sentence cited from 'Being and Time' is careful to enclose the word "essence" in quotation marks. This indicates that "essence" is now being defined neither from *esse essentiae* nor from *esse existentiae* but rather from the ek-static character of Dasein. As ek-sisting, man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into "care." But Da-sein itself occurs essentially as "thrown." It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending." (Heidegger 1993, 230-231).

This transcendence, the "Da", is now shifted away from the nihilating power revealed by human anxiety onto Being itself. Being concerns itself with human beings only insofar as through them its

truth can be revealed. Humans can only ‘guard’ and ‘watch over’ this truth: “Man is rather "thrown" from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in their essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord with this destiny man as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. Man is the shepherd of Being.” (Heidegger, 1993, 234).

How does this revealing manifest itself? In ‘*The Question Concerning Technology*’, (Heidegger, 1993) after examining Aristotle’s 4 types of causality, Heidegger rejects causality as a sufficient explanation for the essence of technology. Instead he wants to grasp the way in which through a technological instrument or machine, a particular Ontological configuration ‘reveals’ itself. Heidegger offers the following example: “Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth, according to the perspectives of the four modes of occasioning. This revealing gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisioned as completed, and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction. Thus, what is decisive in techne¯ does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that techne is a bringing-forth.” (Heidegger 1993, 319).

This bringing-forth or revealing of technology is what Heidegger calls ‘enframing’ or ‘Ge-Stell – the mode of being and essence of technology reveals an interpretation of Being as ‘standing reserve’, as material set for calculation, manipulation and production in accordance with mathematical natural sciences. This enframing is immediately explained by Heidegger in a temporal fashion as an Ontological ‘positioning’: “The essence of modern technology lies in enframing. Enframing belongs within the destining of revealing. These sentences express something different from the talk that we hear more frequently, to the effect that technology is the fate of our age, where “fate” means the inevitability of an unalterable course. But when we consider the essence of technology, then we experience Enframing as a destining of revealing” (Heidegger, 1993, 330).

That is to say, the ontological inquiry concerning the essence of technology reveals that the ‘essence’ spoken of here is a ground or origin which reveals a ‘truth of being’ as a specifically temporal destiny. The essence of technology is seen as a particular temporal configuration or ‘epoch’ of Being which

is revealed to Da-Sein insofar as it its shepherd. The *'arche'* or essence of technology and of the human can only be revealed historically in relation to a 'sending' and 'destiny'.

What takes place when human beings experience their transcendence in this way and look out into the 'clearing of being' to discover the way it is 'destined'? This is what Heidegger refers to as 'Ereignis' – a central concept of his later philosophy which aims to capture in thought the experience of Being itself as history(Heidegger, 2002). To conceive of a difference between Being and beings, to allow for an interrogation of causality on the basis of its 'arche', which is the critical strategy of Heidegger's philosophy, is to unconceal the fact that this distinction was blurred. Being as unconcelament therefore opens the Ontological difference and takes it backs to its origin as an experience of historicity. Being can reveal itself through time, historically, because, like the Ontological *arch*e, it presupposes itself in time. Being is always already withdrawn from itself and converted (destined) into historical epochs. Heidegger explained how this is possible for him in the essay *On Time and Being* (Heidegger, 2002). In that text the historical dimension of Ontology is thought both as a foundation and an 'end': "Metaphysics is the history of the formations of Being, that is, viewed from Ereignis, of the history of self-withdrawal of what is sending in favour of the destinies, given in sending, of an actual letting – presence of what is present. Metaphysics is the oblivion of Being, and that means the history of the concealment and withdrawal of that which gives Being. The entry of thinking into Ereignis is thus equivalent to the end of this withdrawl's history. The 'oblivion' of Being 'supersedes' itself into the awakening into Ereignis." (Heidegger ,2002 40-41).

Far from being a property of Da-Sein or emerging from a foundation or source external to Being (God, Nature etc), the Ereignis belongs to Being itself; it is within the essence of Being itself as temporal and heading towards its end: "But the concealment which belongs to metaphysics as its limit must belong to Ereignis itself. That means that the withdrawal which characterised metaphysics in the form of the oblivion of Being now shows itself as the dimension of concealment itself. But now this concealment does not conceal itself. Rather the attention of thinking is now concerned with it. With the entry of thinking into Eriegnis, its own way of concealment proper to it arrives. Ereignis is in itself Expropriation (Ent-Eignis). This word contains in a manner commensurate with Ereignis the early Greek 'lethe' in the sense of concealing. Thus, the lack of destiny of Ereignis does not mean it has no e-motion. Rather, it means that the manner of movement most proper to Ereignis- turning toward us in withdrawal- first shows itself as what is to be thought. This means that the history of Being as what is to be thought is at an end" (Heidegger, Ibid.).

The interrogation of the ways in which Being destines itself reveals behind every historical situation or culture a more primordial 'epoch' of Being that determines how beings are revealed (for the Greeks as 'unconcelament, for Christianity as 'creation', for a certain brand of moderns as' production', and today as 'totality' or 'ecology' as part of a cybernetic interpretation which breaks with the mechanistic universe of 'first' modernity).But in order to see this we must also conceive of the end of Being's journey, which Heidegger announces in his later thought. With the same gesture in which he announces the history of Being, Heidegger proclaims the end of philosophy. The recognition of the concealment of Being which culminates. Heidegger's critical excavation of the Ontological horizon of technology and science depends on the historicity of Being itself – on its transcendence as a historical arche that realises its end in the age of 'accomplished nihilism'.

in the nihilism of our age is possible only because one can at the same time unconceal Being itself.: "*what takes place is simply a movement of concealment without anything being hidden or anything hiding, without anything being veiled or anything veiling – pure self-destining without destiny, simple abandonment of being to itself*" (Agamben, 2000, 131).

But why did Heidegger introduce temporality, or history into Being? According to Agamben's analysis this is due to Heidegger's inability to break from both Aristotle and Hegel in his formulation of Fundamental Ontology. In chapter 2 I demonstrated how Aristotle introduced time into Being by making every determination an indication of a past in such a way that to ask, 'what is a thing? is to ask 'what was that thing'? He did so by bifurcating Being into substance and predicates, concealing the first essence as a historical origin. Heidegger mobilies this distinction as a historical narrative that is restored to unity at the end of its journey, revealing what is must have presupposed all along. We already saw how, in the 'Analytic of Dasein' the speculative Grammar of transcendence was transposed into a Grammar of finitude, rendering Heidegger's Ontology of moods inseparable from its relationship to metaphysical linguistic categories. Heidegger's attempt to transcend his own earlier perspective remains within the same horizon.

The end of the destiny of Being can be conceived of as a historical epoch that recognizes the end of history. In this way the Hegelianism of Heidegger's perspective is in full display. For Hegel, in the definitive reading Kojeve provided, philosophy begins when, abandoning their animal nature, human beings learn to speak a *'there'* or *'that'* and separating themselves from the rest of Nature, begin their 'speculative' historical trajectory (See Kojeve, 1968b and the analysis in Agamben, 2006). Philosophy ends when mankind finds its fulfillment in the 'end of history' after it is exhausted in all its historical figures. In a similar fashion, not too distinct from Kojeve's reading of Hegel we

discussed in a previous chapter, in Heidegger the same process occurs as an abandonment of the historical destiny of humanity; as an absolution or fulfillment of the original splitting of Being through the unification of man and history in Ereignis. At The end of history, anxiety dissolves itself into a 'letting be' that sees human beings enter into their 'proper' destiny as beings without any historical mission.

One of the strengths of Agamben's comparison of how the two thinkers conceive of the 'end of philosophy' shows that this gesture is intimately tied to an experience of language. (Agamben, 2000). Hegel identified the history of thought with the declension of linguistic terms in their respective cases, until at the end of its itinerary, surveying its past as history, language returns to itself in the form of absolute self-reference and history comes to an end. For Hegel, there remains nothing more to be thought (Agamben 2000, 126-128). In Heidegger, a similar gesture occurs whereby, at the closure of the history of Being, language comes to itself as a pure speaking beyond any content - a pure utterance which takes account of the 'saying' itself and risks itself in the gap between semiotic and semantic. This occurs within 'language as such', and not in any particular historical language. Language gives itself over to itself in a form of speech that recognises that it is being spoken.

If, for Heidegger language is the 'house of being', that is because it is through language that Being is said. If the various epochs of Being represented the various ways in which it could be said then the end of metaphysics, understood linguistically, is the point at which Being has no more names, and can only be evoked poetically or meditatively through philosophical 'thinking' and 'remembrance' which seek to take account of a human condition bereft of a task or a historical reality (Agamben, 2000, 135-137).

Whether as a Grammar of finitude or as a restoration of a historical origin to its fulfillment, Heidegger's thought remains well within the orbit of a metaphysics of negativity. Either losing itself in anxiety or finding itself in post-historical meditation, Da-Sein, without substance except as a being-towards-death or a being that has no more historical vocation, is from beginning to end delivered over to the transcendence of Grammar, remaining captive to the call of 'nothingness'.

It is all the more troubling when in recent years, a certain type of historical 're-assertion' masquerades as an authentic Heideggerian gesture. Heidegger's attempt to 're-indigenise-Germany by retrieving its history Ontologically was premised on his reliance on Indo-European Grammar understood as an opening onto Being. Recently, the Russian ultra-nationalist imperialist philosopher Alexander Dugin

attempted to assimilate the Ontological Difference into Russian exceptionalism on the basis of a reading of Heidegger as an Indo-European philologist in the search for an 'aboriginal' language. (Dugin, 2014) He evokes Heidegger as the thinker who both brings European culture and history to a close and affords therefore the possibility of another beginning. He therefore calls to 'listen carefully' to Heidegger's language, the actual words he uses rather than the concepts and categories, and therefore to 'learn to think with words and stems in our native language'. Dugin's quest to wage war against American globalism as the final stage of European metaphysics begins in an attempt to revitalise Russian language and turn it into an 'Ontological' language, atop what he considers to be the wreckage of Western Culture: "Perhaps, now is the right time to participate in the process of true philosophising and to unseal the virgin treasure of the Slavo-Russian language in order to create new meanings and to reach new intellectual horizons, based upon a newly grasped Russian antiquity." (Dugin, 2014, Introduction).

We completely reject this kind of blatant post-colonial fascist aggression parading as philosophical profundity. What Dugin and the Russian imperialism he applauds reveal however, is that Heidegger's thought is plagued with a fateful paradox by which the 'end of philosophy' also somehow still demands something of human beings to seize their 'new beginning'. This tension can lead to the most creative misinterpretations with fateful political consequences. For those of us searching for a political and cultural reality beyond nationalist aggression and false 'indigenisiation' it is important to ask whether there indeed lies something beyond the destiny of Being that does not end up either as a desperate mythology of global grandeur or fade into a poetic mysticism. If my analysis is correct, mobilizing truth as 'aletheia' in distinction to propositions remains within the horizon of a split Ontology that creates the very 'origin it claims to retrieve in reconciliation. Mankind could only be said to 'return to itself' insofar as it was thought of as split and divided to begin with. Whether philosophy can avoid this structure or find another way out of it is a question that, with Agamben, but finally beyond him, I tackle in the conclusion and final chapter.

# Conclusion

## The Profanation of Philosophy and the Beginning of Decolonisation

In this thesis I have shown how philosophy claimed to establish itself as a separate and autonomous practice as a result of the splitting of language into two separate realities. I traced the history of this operation to the emergence of a fully phonetic alphabet. We also saw how 'Life' becomes a separate and sacred foundation or referent through its articulation through the same split apparatus of language dependent on the same conception of the alphabet. The semiotic paradigm was developed on the basis of the alphabetisation of speech which allowed for an externalisation, as it were, of language as an autonomous totalised system. As we saw in previous chapters, Generative Grammar and the cybernetic paradigm it is complicit with, performs an internalisation of Comparative Grammar as a synchronic system that is believed to be lodged in the mind of each individual speaker as a genetic species inheritance. From Chomsky to Habermas, 'language' becomes a cognitive mechanism that, whilst remaining structured like semiotic Grammar, abandons its historical dimension.

In the Introduction to this thesis I suggested that Agamben's thought attempts to offer a form of philosophical therapy for settler-colonial culture. I described this culture as one that is abstracted from its historical existence and artificially, but deliberately, divided into colonising and colonised classes in order to prevent their coming together in common struggle. Settler society exists in an abstract a-historical reality trapped in a life without any meaning other than as a generic universal referent and, speaking a language that it can only identify as a rationally programmed protocol of information. The split between the living being and the speaking being has been perfected and so we no longer recognise any capacity to relate the two terms to each other or to effect any change in the fundamental meaning of either. We are therefore caught living a life to which we can grant no meaning and speak a language in which we cannot find any possibility for interpreting life. Where life has no meaning and words do not describe anything but themselves, suffering will remain without a name.

I described the limits of our contemporary conceptions of language and life in previous chapters. I shall now demonstrate how philosophy can affect a subtle transformation of the limits of our language so as to enable the potential for a more significant transformation of our conditions of living. Agamben

once described thinking as the 'courage of hopelessness'. Against all despair, reconciliation or adaptation, philosophy must act as an "*intensity that can suddenly vivify any field of knowledge and life, obliging it to come up against its own limits*." (Agamben, 2007c,66). In terms of Agamben's philosophical practice we need to ask if human speech can be understood as a real act without being subsumed under alphabetic closure? Is it possible to speak without considering speech as always already transcribable or writeable?

Agamben's Philosophical Archaeology aims to liberate language from the semiotic paradigm. It aims to uncover that 'which was never written' for the sake of opening up the possibility of a different notion of life. Instead of a 'sacred' bare life separated from its language, Agamben searches for what he calls a 'form of life': a life that cannot be separated from its form – a human existence that is not caught in a lethal separation between its speaking and living being (Agamben, 2017). For Agamben, the purpose of philosophy is to dismantle the separation between living and speaking that for him governs both the history of the West and its contemporary mode of governance.

Agamben's philosophical strategy seems to rest on the wager that it is still possible to not confuse the letter with the signifier. This confusion, as we saw, is premised on the idea that post alphabetic speech is inherently split, without any possibility of an articulation between the living being and the speaking being). Is there any hope therefore for a philosophical practice or therapy that by enacting a 'critique of separation' can help restore life to its linguistic historical dimension in the service of contemporary challenges? How indeed does Agamben propose to overcome the universalisation of generic life as the dominant figure of the human being?

Carlo Salzani has argued that Agamben provides a series of epistemological practices that generate a 'denudation' of bare-life for the sake of liberating it from its imprisonment within dominant aesthetic and political apparatuses. (Salzani,2016). I argued in previous chapters that for Agamben, epistemology is dependent on Ontology. That for him, the way language shapes our relation to the world determines our mode of cognition and forms of knowledge. Beyond epistemology, can Agamben's work provide a practical linguistic therapy that will serve the men and women of settler societies in their attempts to come to terms with decolonisation? How do we take back what we have been separated from?

The central philosophical practice which Agamben develops in order to restore language and life to human beings is what he terms ‘profanation’: the return of what has been separated and made sacred back to the free use of human beings. Borrowing the term from Roman religion, Agamben’s explains that “*Roman jurists knew perfectly well what it meant to "profane." Sacred or religious were the things that in some way belonged to the Gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and commerce of men; they could be neither sold nor held in lien, neither given for usufruct nor burdened by servitude. Any act that violated or transgressed this special unavailability, which reserved these things exclusively for the celestial gods (in which case they were properly called "sacred") or for the gods of the underworld (in which case they were simply called “religious"), was sacrilegious. And if "to consecrate" (sacrare) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, "to profane" meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men. The great jurist Trebatius thus wrote, ‘In the strict sense, profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men, and "pure" was the place that was no longer allotted to the gods of the dead and was now ‘neither sacred, nor holy, nor religious, freed from all names of this sort’” (*Agamben, 2007, 73).

Profanation is therefore to be distinguished sharply from Secularisation. Both secularisation and profanation are political actions: “*the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power has seized*” (Agamben, Ibid.) To secularise means to make ‘worldly’. This is a repressive and positivist manoeuvre which operates as a justification for that which it pretends to critique. It does not change the nature and function of a thing but merely pretends to change the authority under which it operates. In this way a secular ‘State’ or ‘regime’ maintains all the functions and repressive apparatuses of a theological one but replaces the source of authority from a God to a political fiction like ‘people’ or ‘rule of law’, all the while maintaining the same violent and blind dominion and administrative divisions over those it administers. And a ‘secular’ Grammar or language merely rejects the transcendental nature of what it reveals in favour of a historical myth of origin or a seemingly natural foundation from which we cannot extricate ourselves. To say that we ‘live’ in a secular world means that we are still at bottom living a ‘sacred’ bare life, which instead of being blessed by the grace of God is now governed by the tyranny of dumb and blind genetics.

To profane something means simply to return it to free human use: “*Profanation, however, neutralises what is profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura*

*and is returned to use*." (Agamben, 2007,77). It is the dismantling of that which has been consecrated - separated and made sacred. To consecrate – to make sacred- means to remove or separate a thing or person from human use for the sake of maintaining it in a specifically designated place or given over to exclusive possession for the sake of ritualistic purposes (in this sense we can speak of a sovereign as a sacred person, an artwork as sacred by being exhibited in a museum , or a commodity as magical by being exhibited in a shop window that remains prohibited unless purchased – there is nothing more sacred than a 'display object' or a seemingly inexorable scientific law).

Lest we assume that to profane something means to return it to some mythological origin or natural state, Agamben emphasises that the specificity of a profane object is that it can be profaned only if it was once made sacred. The profane thing is not natural but the end result of a process or action that retrieves it from its sacred status or separated sphere into a 'new' and unprecedented use: "*The thing that is returned to the common use of men is pure, profane, free of sacred names. But use does not appear here as something natural; rather, one arrives at it only be means of profanation*" (Agamben, Ibid.) Due to the unprecedented use to which a profane apparatus is put to, one cannot predict what will emerge in its place. Therefore, we cannot assume that this new use will subscribe to any 'proper' forms of human or political conduct: "*The passage from the sacred to the profane can, in fact, also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play*." (Agamben,2007,75).

Only if we understand how philosophy has made both life and language 'sacred' can we attempt to profane them and put them to a free and new use. To profane philosophy is therefore to profane the apparatus of alphabetisation and the 'bare life' that serves as its foundation – to find a new use for language so as to avoid the capture of the voice and the reduction of human life into a bare generic meaningless and killable substance.

With this notion of Profanation, Agamben aims to put philosophy to a certain therapeutic or practical use for the sake of the construction of a new way or form of life. Before we examine how this could be done in greater detail, it is important to first interrogate the dominant paradigm of philosophical practice and therapy that today claims to restore philosophy to its alleged original vocation.

# Philosophy – a Way of 'Life' or a Form-of-Life?

In the past few decades, the idea of 'philosophy as a way of life 'or therapy has become fashionable in certain academic circles. This has primarily led to an increase in publications offering reinterpretations of classical texts as prescriptions for a well-balanced life that does nothing to disturb or trouble the status quo (Cooper 2013 and Nussbaum 2018). In addition, we have seen an increase in popular civic initiatives like 'Stoicism Day' or the commercialization and hollowing out of philosophy through ventures like Alain De Botton's 'School of Life'. Much of this can arguably be traced to the reception of the research of the French historian Pierre Hadot who sought to rehabilitate the notion of philosophy as a series of spiritual exercises aimed at constructing a way of life. (Hadot, 1995 and 2004).

By reconstructing the uses of the various philosophies of antiquity as 'spiritual exercises', or transformative therapies for the sake of living well, Hadot showed how ancient philosophy was split between on the one hand, written formulas and doctrines, and on the other, spiritual, meditative and existential practices. It was the practical therapeutic aspect that was the core of philosophical study and living, not the construction of theoretical systems or logical analyses for its own sake. He famously separated the content of ancient philosophy into Forms of Life – the daily practices, meditations, diets, personal conduct and forms of association befitting a philosopher and Forms of Discourse - the type of written forms in which doctrines are presented as pedagogical aids (systems, letters, written dialogues, aphorisms, lectures, poems).

Hadot specifically counters the argument that writing was the central element of philosophical practice in antiquity. For Hadot, ancient, and many modern philosophical texts (he focuses on Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) are to be interpreted as aids to pedagogy and not autonomous 'texts', as both Deconstruction and Logical positivism would have it. Rather they are summaries and aids of exercises and techniques aimed at the transformation of the soul. He argues that: "For ancient philosophy, at least beginning from the sophists and Socrates, intended, in the first instance, to form people and to transform souls. That is why in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given above all in oral form, because only the living word, in dialogues, in conversations pursued for a long time, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable, as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching." (Hadot 1989,11). Whilst the aims of philosophical

therapy and their versions of the desired 'state of perfection' may vary between the ancient schools (serene apathy for the Stoics, rational yet sensual frugality for the Epicureans) the ambition was for individuals to absorb philosophy into every aspect of their lived existence. Philosophy was a total and totalising way of life. Theoretical exposition is always for the sake of practical transformation guided by the aim of achieving sage like wisdom As such it is to be understood from the vantage point of its practical articulation in everyday life, and not simply from its textual expression: "I mean, then, that philosophical discourse must be understood from the perspective of the way of life of which it is both the expression and the means. Consequently, philosophy is above all way of life, but one which is intimately linked to philosophical discourse" (Hadot 2004, 3-4).

The split in the forms of philosophical practice are evident in the other major division or split in the philosophical life – the split between the world of truth and everyday reality. The philosopher was committed to an other-worldly belief in perfection and wisdom based on the 'idea of reason'; the allegedly discoverable structure of the cosmos that is concealed behind everyday reality and attainable only through consistent and intense practice and study. At the same time the philosopher "must live this everyday life every day, in the world in which he feels himself a stranger and in which others perceive him to be one as well. And it is precisely in this daily life that he must seek to attain that way of life which is utterly foreign to the everyday world. The result is a perpetual conflict between the philosopher's effort to see things as they are from the standpoint of universal nature and the conventional vision of things underlying human society, a conflict between the life one should live and the customs and conventions of daily life. This conflict can never be fully resolved." (Hadot 1995,58).

Should philosophy today remain split between the world of 'truth' and everyday living? Between the mundane and the unattainable? Is this not a trope that, since Socrates pronounced the unexamined life not worth living, has persisted even up to Heidegger's distinction between 'idle chatter' and 'thinking'? or his, 'falling prey to everydayness' opposed to 'existential resolve'?(Heidegger, 1962)

For Hadot, this distinction and conflict remained unresolvable. The reason for this lies in his epistemological definition of philosophical discourse, which remains tied to a quasi-dualism between thought and language. On the face of it, Hadot insists that philosophical living and philosophical discourse are not to be separated or opposed, for "Discourse can have a practical aspect, to the extent

that it tends to produce an effect on the listener or reader. Insofar as way of life is concerned, it cannot, of course, be theoretic, but it can be theoretical-that is to say, contemplative" (Hadot 2004, 4).

Hadot relied for this point on a definition of discourse that he wishes to distinguish from the contemporary meaning of the word : "In order to be clear, I must specify that I understand 'discourse' in the philosophical sense of 'discursive' thought expressed in written or oral language, and not in the currently widespread sense of "a way of speaking which reveals an attitude" (as in 'racist discourse' for example)." (Hadot, 2004,4-5).

This is where a paradox emerges in Hadot's interpretation. On the one hand, ancient philosophy attributed the fit between thought and action to the existence of an interpretable cosmos understood as a closed world. This allowed for the notion of a philosophical way of life aimed at truth, which whilst only approximated, remains attainable as an ideal. On the other hand, Hadot claims that philosophical thought is not dependent on language and it is this fact that allows for the notion of a way of life to emerge. Thought is understood epistemologically as a cognitive process taking place in the human mind independently from its expression in this or that language. This epistemology is premised on a modern scientific, not Greek understanding of the relationship between thought and language.

For the Greeks, the relationship between thought and language and the world was ontological, and only after that, epistemological. The relation was guaranteed for the Greeks by the idea of 'cosmos': the interrelation between the knowable structure of the universe and the graspable nature of truthful ethical living. This distinction is abolished in modernity. Following the triumph of mathematical natural sciences as a model for interpreting nature, the cosmos is thought to be infinite, hence never fully knowable.

The great historian of science, Alexander Koyre described with great detail the development and consequences of the Scientific Revolution of the $17^{th}$ century. Attempting to summarise the unprecedented transformation in the experience of the world brought about by the theories of the European astronomers, Koyre argues that the most significant outcome was the destruction of the cosmos – the world as a meaningful closed totality – and its replacement by the infinity of an open and valueless universe in which humankind no longer had a determinate place: " This scientific and philosophical revolution - it is indeed impossible to separate the philosophical from the purely scientific aspects of this process: they are interdependent and closely linked together - can be

described roughly as bringing forth the destruction of the Cosmos, that is, the disappearance, from philosophically and scientifically valid concepts, of the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole (a whole in which the hierarchy of value determined the hierarchy and structure of being, rising from the dark, heavy and imperfect earth to the higher and higher perfection of the stars and heavenly spheres) and its replacement by an indefinite and even infinite universe which is bound together by the identity of its fundamental components and laws, and in which all these components are placed on the same level of being." (Koyre, 1957, 2).

The destruction of the cosmos resulted naturally in the rejection of the possibility of Ontology as a science along with any understanding of language as a real entity mediating between humankind and the world. Epistemology replaces Ontology once the coupling being/language which held sway over medieval thought after the Aristotelian revival comes to be replaced with the coupling mathematics/nature: "This, in turn, implies the discarding by scientific thought of all considerations based upon value-concepts, such as perfection, harmony, meaning and aim, and finally the utter devalorisation of being, the divorce of the world of value and the world of facts."(Koyre, Ibid.).

The idea of truth is rent apart and the idea of the inter-relation between the structure of the cosmos and ethical practice is foreclosed, leaving the human being trapped between so-called 'neutral' laws of nature and the 'freedom' of thought, understood purely epistemologically as cognition, or as is fashionable today, opinion. Today, contemplation of the heavens leads to either nihilistic horror of meaninglessness or an attempt to cover it over with sentimental reveries or new-age platitudes that themselves are premised on the acceptance of Copernican cosmology. Modern philosophy remains caught in a nihilistic split between 'theory' and 'praxis', a split which still determines the nature of attempts to utilise philosophical insight for practical or political concerns; a split which proved fatal even for the Marxian revolutionary tradition, despite its dialectical-materialist sophistication.

Hadot faces a similar problem in his work. Hadot's epistemological understanding of ancient philosophy rests on the separation between cognition and linguistic articulation. This is only coherent if it is based on a post-Copernican model of cognition, that is, on a dualism that renders the idea of a philosophical way of life implausible. In order to justify his separation between cognition and language, Hadot relies on a modern geneticist and social Darwinist Jacques Ruffie and hence on a natural scientific discourse that owes its coherence as a scientific paradigm to modern evolutionary science, not ancient cosmology. (See Hadot, 2004, "Introduction").

It would seem then, that the notion of philosophy as a way of life remains incoherent. It is dependent not only on an epistemologically grounded misunderstanding of antiquity, but on a racist cultural anthropology. This entails that, the notion of a philosophical therapy for the sake of decolonization based on Hadot's work is a futile endeavour. Likewise, if the ambition we attributed to Agamben in the Introduction to this thesis is interpreted according to this paradigm it remains a failed one.

There is perhaps a no more telling example of the limitations of Hadot's project than the way he interprets Foucault's work on ancient spiritual exercises. This misunderstanding is also the occasion for Agamben's intervention in the debate surrounding the plausibility of philosophy as a way of life or therapy and is therefore worth lingering on.

For Foucault, an ethics guided by philosophical exercises consisted not in following a norm or approximating an ideal but in a creative and ongoing relationship of the self-to itself – a form of ethical self-reference. This creative aspect of self-relation led Foucault to refer to his philosophical practice as the ambition to generate an 'aesthetics of existence'. It is regarding the interpretation of this practice that Agamben departs from Hadot and Foucault's method. He does so through a direct polemic with the way in which Hadot understood this phrase of his infamous 'student'. Hadot distances himself from what he sees as Foucault's aestheticisation of the labour on the self that is necessary for a philosophical existence. In a lengthy passage, Hadot explained that: "In this labour of the self on the self, in this exercise of the self I also recognize, for my part, an essential aspect of the philosophical life: philosophy is an art of living, a style of life that touches on all of existence. I would, however, hesitate to speak, as Foucault does, of an "aesthetics of existence," both in connection with Antiquity and, in general, as the task of the philosopher. Michel Foucault understands (. . .) this expression in the sense that our own life is the work of art that we must make. The term "aesthetics" indeed evokes, for us moderns, resonances very different from those that the word "beauty" (*kalon, kalos*) had in Antiquity. Moderns have the tendency to represent the beautiful as an autonomous reality independent of good and evil, while for the Greeks, by contrast, when the term referred to a human being, it normally implied a moral value. . .. For this reason, instead of speaking of a "cultivation of the self," it would be better to speak of transformation, of transfiguration, of "overcoming the self." To describe this state, one cannot avoid the term "wisdom," which, it seems to me, in Foucault appears rarely, if ever (. . .) Curiously Foucault, who does do justice to the conception of philosophy as therapeutics, does not seem to notice that this therapeutics is above all intended to procure peace of the soul(. . .)In Platonism, but also in Epicureanism and Stoicism, liberation from anxiety is obtained by means of a movement that causes us to pass from individual and impassioned subjectivity to the objectivity of a

universal perspective. It is not a matter of the construction of a self, but on the contrary, of an overcoming of the I, or at least of an exercise by means of which the I is situated in the totality and has an experience of the self as part of this totality". (Hadot, in Agamben, 2017,1113).

Sharpe (2018) has argued that Hadot maintains that modern a-cosmism does not invalidate his project. For Sharpe, Hadot manages to retain a comprehensive conception of philosophy as a way of life due to his rejection of dogmatic ontologies in favour of embracing an agnostic stance : The key thing, in terms of Hadot's philosophical project, is that this thematic metaphor of the "view from above" does not presuppose any single dogmatic ontology, no more than does a heightened attentiveness to the present moment and its demands. It only requires some account of a world much greater in scale than the tiny circles of concern which our lives circumscribe, into whose greater frame "the moi" can be "reinserted" by the philosopher's transformed mode of perception" (Sharpe, 2018, 133) This agnosticism results for Hadot in the cultivation of an individual philosophical stance which , abandoning any reliance on an objective relationship to reality amounts to a subjective disposition or posture. From this perspective, Hadot's charge against Foucault can be seen as a projection of his own predicament onto Foucault's own project.

Agamben departs from this interpretation and wishes to rehabilitate the proper Ontological dimension of philosophical practices. He does so initially by taking care to show that for Foucault, an 'aesthetics of existence' has nothing to do with dandyish practices or even anything necessarily artistic. Spiritual exercises are aesthetic not because they result in an artistic product or object, or because they are preoccupied with artistic affairs. Rather, aesthetics here means that, lacking cosmic orientation, the subject acts to 'create' itself because it is not given in advance; it has to create and refashion itself continuously. This is because: "*Self" for Foucault is not a substance nor the objectifiable result of an operation (the relation with itself): it is the operation itself, the relation itself. That is to say, there is not a subject before the relationship with itself and the use of the self: the subject is that relationship and not one of its terms. This means that the constitution of the subject insofar as it is conducted through a relationship to and through the world is an Ontological, not epistemological problem. There is not first a subject and then a knowledge that it acquires, as post Cartesian philosophy from Locke to Kant decrees, but only a subject insofar as it creates itself as a subject that can or cannot know. Subjectivity is a practice, not a substance or fact*." (Agamben, 2017,1118).

Understanding the subject as an ontological rather than an epistemological practice, as a process rather than as substance, affords Agamben the possibility to see in Foucault's work a challenge both to Aristotle's philosophy and the way in which Hadot interprets the history of philosophy.

Foucault's contribution to critical resistance and philosophy is immense and we by no mean to reject his importance or to suggest that there is no more reason to explore his work with fresh eyes. Indeed, several studies have been undertaken in recent years focusing on the rich legacy Foucault left for those attempting to formulate a philosophical practice or therapy befitting contemporary conditions (See McGushin, 2007, Jenkins, 2001). Fiona Jenkins has proposed that Foucault rejected the 'Californian ideology' which focused on individualistic cult of the self in favour of a self-relation prior to knowledge (Jenkins, 2001). But the opposition between knowledge and self-mastery is incoherent if we remember that for antiquity, self-mastery was conceived of only on the basis of cosmic knowledge; philosophical practices were undertaken for the sake of the acquisition of an objectively determined 'truth'. In his lecture course in 1981-1982 on *'The Hermeneutics of The Subject'* Foucault's ingeniously re-interpreters the Delphic oracle in his attempt to distinguish 'care of the self' from 'self-knowledge (Foucault, 2006). But this ultimately fails in the context of a modernity that has abandoned the belief in the co-dependence of ethics and cosmology. From the perspective of philosophical therapy, Foucault's attempt to retrieve ancient spiritual ascetic practices in order to offer a counter-practice to modern philosophy suffers from the same limitations as Hadot. The ideology of philosophy as 'spiritual practice' ends up deepening the fetish of freedom which the market and contemporary society demand in order to function but dress up adaptational rituals as a series of personal practices and exercises that, liberated from their political and cosmological context, resemble not much more than techniques for individual wellness laden with the pathos of being 'philosophical'.

It is undoubtedly true that, as Foucault argued, contemporary society relies on both the disciplining of bodies and the production of governable subjectivities. But, as I suggested in an earlier chapter of this thesis, at the bottom of these bodies and subjectivities lies a 'generic' and sacred life – a human being as a waste product that is the foundation for and the end result of the total social/industrial process. For Agamben, *'biopower's supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, Zoe and Bios, the inhuman and the human—survival*" (Agamben, Homo Sacer 3, 156) Sovereign biopower does not only kill human beings or makes them live in this or that way, it does so by producing human beings as an excess – a sacred remnant of a politically governed production process. Catherine Mills summarised Agamben's departure from Foucault and shows how : "Against Foucault, Agamben suggests that the definitional formula of

biopower is not to make live or let die' but rather, to make survive, that is, to produce bare life as life reduced to survival through the separation of the human from the inhuman, or the speaking being from the living being."(Mills 2008, 89).

Agamben departs from Foucault because to his mind, Foucault's recovery of ancient spirituality was governed by an ideology of 'freedom' (See also Lemm 2017). Foucault searched for the different ways in which human beings can constitute themselves as free subjects, evading domination through self-constituted creative ethical, sexual and political practices. This is, ultimately, a practice that remains completely futile as a form of resistance under contemporary society which depends for its coherence precisely on the fiction of a free subject, and thereby only reproduces the aporia it claims to critique: *"The Ontological aporia is found in Foucault, as one could have foreseen, on the level of practice, in the theory of power relations and of the governance of human beings that is actualized in it. Power relations, unlike states of domination, necessarily entail a free subject, which it is a matter of "conducting" and governing and which, as free, stubbornly resists power. And yet, precisely insofar as the subject "freely" conducts and governs itself, it will inevitably enter into power relations, which consist in conducting the conduct of others (or allowing one's own to be conducted by others). The one who, by "conducting" his life, has been constituted as subject of his own actions, will thus be "conducted" by other subjects or will seek to conduct others: subjectivation into a certain form of life is, to the same extent, subjection to a power relation. The aporia of democracy and its governance of human beings—the identity of the governors and the governed, absolutely separated and yet to the same degree indissolubly united in an indivisible relation—is an Ontological aporia, which concerns the constitution of the subject as such*." (Agamben, 2017.,1123).The co-dependence of 'bare life' – a life without language – and 'Grammar – a language understood only as an always already writeable supplement for that generic being - means that freedom is nothing but the recognition and sensation of this gap; freedom is the only thing left for a human being that is separated from itself, that has nothing but its own bare and empty life. In the words of a popular American songwriter: 'freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose'.

Agamben's wager is that a confrontation with the history of Ontology, such as we reconstructed in the previous chapters, will expose the linguistic derivation of the Ontology of freedom and government. It is therefore on the terrain of a theory and practice of language that the 'ungovernable' element of human life may be found. Foucault's ethics of subjectivity departs from the linguistic foundations of philosophical practice that he himself articulated in the archaeological research projects he undertook earlier in his life.(Foucault, 1972) Agamben, aware of this incongruity, tries to mobilise

Foucault's critique of structuralism, in order to emphasise the linguistic derivation of the subject of discourse ,thereby recovering precisely the ontological dimension to Foucault's work that seems to be lacking in his writings on ancient ethical practices of truth.

As if reprimanding his now deceased mentor for straying from the original intentions of his work, Agamben refers Foucault and the reader back to Benveniste's linguistic theory of enunciation. Agamben explains that for the early Foucault, "*In truth, to take seriously the statement "I speak" is no longer to consider language as the communication of a meaning or a truth that originates in a responsible Subject. It is, rather, to conceive of discourse in its pure taking place and of the subject as 'a nonexistence in whose emptiness the unending outpouring of language uninterruptedly continues". In language, enunciation marks a threshold between an inside and an outside, its taking place as pure exteriority; and once the principal referent of study becomes statements, the subject is stripped of all substance, becoming a pure function or pure position. The subject, Foucault writes, " is a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals__ If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called 'statement/ it is not therefore because, one day, someone happened to speak them or put them into some concrete form of writing; it is because the position of the subject can be assigned. To describe a formulation qua statement does not consist in analysing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say,or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it"* (Agamben, 2017, 854-855).

Agamben's analysis shows that to speak has nothing to do with either knowledge or truth and cannot in that sense be said to be dependent on any subjectivity at all. The 'protection' of human speech from its capture by letters leads Agamben to construct a certain philosophical experience or experiment; an 'experimentum linguae' that, whilst exposing the emptiness of linguistic signification, risks the speaker in this anonymity, this non-place : *"It is therefore necessary always again to interrogate the possibility and meaning of the experimentum, investigating its place and genealogy in order to investigate whether there is, with respect to the grammata and the knowledge based on them, another way of addressing the indemonstrability of the voice*."(Agamben, 2018,23).

Philosophy provides not a set of exercises for the bolstering of individual well-being or training in mastery but an experience which shatters the individual speaker by letting them encounter the anonymity and commonality of language. The task of philosophy is to allow human beings to risk themselves in the gap between speaking and living in such a way that "*whoever submits himself to*

*these experiments jeopardises not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change that is just as decisive in the context of the individual's natural history as the liberation of the hand be the erect position was for the primate or as was, for the reptile, the transformation of limbs that changed it into a bird"* (Agamben, 2000, 260).

Philosophy makes us realise that whenever we speak we are speaking *as* no-one but at the same time *for* everyone. Away from any 'spiritual exercise' aimed at truth or the exploration of subjectivities, to be able to speak of anything at all is to perform a kind of 'experiment without truth' upon the living being that assumes a position in language only insofar as it desubjectifies and temporarily abolishes itself in the anonymity of the pronoun. We have encountered a similar point in our discussion of self-reference in chapter 4. There we saw how the end of philosophy was tied to the paradoxes of linguistic self-reference. Whenever language attempts to name itself within language it runs up against a series of antinomies that leads to the declaration of a need for something outside language or away from philosophy. These paradoxes were dependent on the belief that language was still the action of an individual subject, and hence, at bottom still dependent on an epistemological cognitive framework that did not fully grasp the Ontological relationship between language and the world.

But what happens once we contemplate self-reference without a subject? What happens if we consider self-reference as a linguistic gesture or medium that instead of belonging to or being spoken by a subject creates a speaker only at the time in which they speak of the unspeakable – testify to an impossibility? And in what way is this a therapy or solution for the condition of contemporary settler colonialists who, as we have already saw, live a split life between their living and speaking being? What happens when they, as it were, 'risk' themselves' in language by recognising its anonymity?

# Witnessing the Unspeakable

Agamben's solution to the paradox of linguistic self-reference is articulated by what he terms an ethics of testimony (Agamben, 2017). The generic life that underpins contemporary culture is also its silent unspeakable referent. A sacred referent that is separated from human language, rendering us torn between living and speaking. Testimony is the act that brings these two poles of the human in contact; not by presupposing language as already writeable and hence external to the living being, nor by fully assimilating the living being into language in the form of rendering it fully describable and calculable, but by remaining suspended, taking a risk, in the hiatus between the living and speaking being.

Agamben's ethics of testimony emerge from a consideration of the profound paradox formulated by both Jean Francois Lyotard(1988) and Primo Levi(1989) in relation to the Nazi concentration camps. The true witness is the one who cannot bear witness: the horror of the camps was so profound to be beyond articulation -those who experienced the horrors of the camps cannot speak about what they experienced – either they are dead, or, like many survivors they are reduced to silence - the true witness is the one who is incapable of speaking of what they 'saw'. This paradox is expressed also through the experience of those camp inhabitants that Levi describes as undergoing a horror of being reduced to a sub-human condition, the ones whom the camp inhabitants labelled as 'Musellmen'(Levi,1989) As a consequence of deprivation, these camp inhabitants apeeared to dead whilst still alive, therefore also undergoing an experience of an inability to speak of what is happening to them. This applies also in many 'traumatic' experiences, which can be defined as experiences of the impossibility of experiencing anything at all; One can only recount the experience indirectly, or through someone else, or through somehow expressing it as an aporia. A paradox Emerges when we experience the impossibility that emerges when we attempt to speak about something that demands to be said yet can't be articulated. For this reason, William Styron, when chronicling his descent into the most profound Depression, chose the paradoxical yet nonetheless accurate phrase, which he borrowed from Milton, to describe his experience as the manifestation of a "Darkness Visible" (Styron, 1990).

The lacuna of testimony allows for a passage out of self -reference. Instead of language serving as a presupposition upon which reference becomes possible, ending up referring to itself, testimony allows for a '*language, that no longer signifies and that, in no longer signifying, advances into*

*what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance- that of the complete witness, that of he , who by definition, cannot bear witness"*.(Agamben, 2017, 787).

Removed from any juridical sense of testimony as speech that pronounces judgment or corroboration on an event in terms of its truthfulness or reality (Agamben, 2017,773-4) testimony here is the ethical act of giving rise to an impossibility of speaking. What this means from the perspective of the critique of self-reference is that testimony provides a way out of the impasses of semiotics by indicating towards an experience of language that, whilst referring language to something that remains suspended as a potential, is nonetheless of this world : "*to bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense, to the pure undecidability of letters. It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness*" (Agamben, 2017,787). Testimony pushes language not towards a senselessness of letters but to a profanation of letters that allows for the witness to emerge. It is not so much geared towards the content of what was experienced and cannot be said (as this was already experienced as unspeakable), but towards the pure act of speaking as such; the fact that something could not be spoken and yet demanded to be.

The ethics of testimony is a direct response and refutation of the idea that language demands of us to communicate. Something other than language demands of us to speak; something which we cannot endure or speak of and yet have to somehow indicate, even in the form of an indication of this impossibility*: "Not that the entry into language is something that human beings can call into question as they see fit. Rather, the simple acquisition of speech in no way obliges one to speak. The pure pre-existence of language as the instrument of communication— the fact that, for speaking beings, language already exists —in itself contains no obligation to communicate. On the contrary, only if language is not always already communication, only if language bears witness to something to which it is impossible to bear witness, can a speaking being experience something like a necessity to speak."* (Agamben,2017., 804).

Reliving human beings of any necessity to speak on the basis of a norm or regulation, the ethics of testimony are said to open up the possibility of an ethics beyond responsibility and guilt. Insofar as it does not implicate the living being in its own speech but rather points toward an impossibility of speaking, testimony is a practice that is situated in the disjunction between the speaking and the living being without separating the two completely. One still senses the relation between life and speech, but this occurs as the experience of incapacity.

For Agamben, this practice is possible due to the self-reference that emerges in language as a consequence of the nature of pronouns. This practice of testimony emerges whenever a person assumes their subjectivity through pronouns. When they 'shift' into a speaking position within language. As we saw already in the discussion of Benveniste, to say 'I' does not mean to refer to any substantial living entity but only to indicate that someone is speaking, anonymously as it were. Language can only be said to refer or to be spoken by someone insofar as they assume within it the position of a subject of speech. By assuming the pronoun, the living being enters into an aporetic situation: insofar as it becomes a subject, it does so only through desubjectification; only through becoming an empty linguistic being. To speak is therefore also to indicate that 'someone' or 'something' is speaking, which I cannot wholly assume or fully encompass. In this way, for Agamben, speaking bears witness to something non-assumable or unaccountable that nonetheless remains in close relation to the speaker. The individual speaker, by speaking, becomes a witness to the act of speech as such. It speaks only insofar as it recognises itself only as a speaker; it creates a disjunction between itself as a living being and a speaking being and therefore bears witness to 'its own ruin' (Agamben,2017, 853).

This means that linguistic self-reference shifts from being a logical paradox into an ethical act. The act of witnessing the existence of an impossibility of speaking. This means that to bear witness is a mode of being or acting that requires a form of subjectivity that shifts from being a substance into being sort of medium or conduit of language. Testimony is carried out by a human being that Agamben calls a gestural being': a being which is neither the author of its acts nor the subject about which something is said, but a medial being (Agamben, 2000). Following an explanation offered by the Latin linguist Varro, Agamben claims that: "*What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human*" (Agamben, 2000, 66). Testimony is best described as an ethical gesture of our being in language rather than an 'act' of a subject. The living being emerges within language not as its referent or foundation but as a gestural being, one that does not so much speak as is 'bespoken'

# Language: A Shameful Gesture

The attempt to develop the idea of a 'gestural' or 'medial' understanding of the human being in language leads Agamben to develop what he calls a 'modal Ontology'. Trying to move beyond the Aristotelian schema of a substance and its attributes and following on from his rejection of Foucault's reliance on subjectivity Agamben builds on his analysis of Benveniste in search of an Ontology that facilitates a different kind of relation between the living human being and its existence in language. A modal Ontology does not depend on a subject but rather articulates subjectivity as a result of how it interacts with its capacities to be acted upon: *"Modal categories, as operators of Being, never stand before the subject as something he can choose or reject; and they do not confront him as a task that he can decide to assume or not to assume in a privileged moment. The subject, rather, is a field of forces always already traversed by the incandescent and historically determined currents of potentiality and impotentiality, of being able not to be and not being able not to be".* (Agamben, 2017, 859).

The rejection of the Ontology of substance means that for Agamben, to conceive of human action one has to do away with any belief in a free subject based on the autonomy of will or the cognitive notion of a consciousness lodged in the mind. If modern epistemology and individualism are premised on the splitting between cognition and language – the split between 'living' and 'speaking'- then a modal Ontology attempts to describe the way in which human beings are taken up by language prior to any split between their living and speaking being. Against all philosophies of the subject as an autonomous substance or foundation, and equally against the metaphysics of cognitive communication and discourse, a modal Ontology focuses on the way in which human beings are afforded a relationship to the world though the way in which language calls upon or demands something of them. The way in which language implicates our human passivity or responsiveness by deciding how it is to be deployed: "*The categories of modality are not founded on the subject, as Kant maintains, nor are they derived from it; rather, the subject is what is at stake in the process in which they interact. They divide and separate, in the subject, what is possible and is impossible, the living being, and the speaking being, the Musselmann and the witness- and in this way they decide on the subject*" (Agamben, 2017,858-859).

In Homo Sacer 4.2 (Agamben, 2017), Agamben develops a detailed analysis of the category of 'mode' as it is conceived in scholastic and early modern philosophy, culminating in the philosophy of Spinoza, whom for Agamben becomes the paradigmatic thinker of modality. There is no need to offer a detailed reconstruction of this analysis except to point out the central features of modality in terms of our thesis.

An important point is that 'mode' is not a logical category (as in, modal logic) but an Ontological – linguistic one that relates to our relationship to the world : "*The concept of mode—insofar as it seeks to think the coincidence or indifference of essence and existence, potential and act—carries with it an ambiguity, so that in the history of philosophy, it is presented now as a logical concept (one prefers to speak then of "modality" or modal logic), now as an Ontological concept. The ambiguity is still evident in Kant, according to whom the categories of modality express the relation of an object with our faculty of knowing and yet "do not have only a logical meaning . . . but are to pertain to things and their possibility, actuality, or necessity". It is possible to see in this dual nature of modalities something more than an echo of the peculiar nature of the formal distinction according to Scotus (which is more than a distinction of reason and yet less than a real distinction) and of mode according to Suárez, which is real, but not like a thing (the modes non sunt formaliter entia). The undecidability of logic and Ontology is, in this sense, consubstantial with the concept of mode and must be brought back to the constitutive undecidability of Aristotelian onto-logy, inasmuch as the latter thinks being insofar as it is said. This means that the ambiguity of the concept of mode cannot be simply eliminated but must rather be thought as such. It is possible that the dispute between philosophy inappropriately defined as continental and analytic philosophy has its root in this ambiguity and can therefore be resolved only on the terrain of a rethinking of the theory of modes and of the categories of modality."* (Agamben, 2017, 1172-1173).

Secondly, modal Ontology immediately relates to an ethics – to a practice and to way of being in which human are not separated from their language or their form. Modality dispenses with the Ontology of negativity in favour of a 'mode of existence: "*In order to correctly think the concept of mode, it is necessary to conceive it as a threshold of indifference between Ontology and ethics. Just as in ethics character (ethos) expresses the irreducible being-thus of an individual, so also in Ontology, what is in question in mode is the "as" of being, the mode in which substance is its modifications. Being demands its modifications; they are its ethos: its being irreparably consigned to its own modes of being, to its "thus". The mode in which something is, the being thus of an entity is a category that belongs irreducibly to Ontology and to ethics (which can also be expressed by*

*saying that in mode they coincide). In this sense, the claim of a modal Ontology should be terminologically integrated in the sense that, understood correctly, a modal Ontology is no longer an Ontology but an ethics (on the condition that we add that the ethics of modes is no longer an ethics but an Ontology).”* (Agamben, 2017, 1184-1185).

This initially appears not too distinct form Heidegger's Ontology which emphasises the inseparability of Da-Sein from its modes, the inseparability of *essence* from *existence* (Heidegger,1962). But, as I demonstrated in chapter 6, for Heidegger this inseparability was expressed through a Grammar of finitude – through the pronouns and shifters that transformed the human being into a' there'. This resulted in a form of negativity that could only be conceived of as a meditation upon death... Modal ethics cannot begin from a subject or 'Da-Sein' that taking itself for granted as a representative of a species which begins to question itself and its world on the basis of some other foundation. The Ontology of negativity relies in the last instance on the separability of the living being from its language through tis contemplation of its negativity: its mortality and anxiety. Instead we must begin from the fact that in order to have a 'Da', in order to have a 'name' I must already be called upon in language without remainder. The crucial issue therefore, is not simply how human beings are related to their 'here' and 'how', but to ask how they are 'called' by language. I can be ethical because I am wholly inseparable from language: *“The whole problem of the relation between essence and existence, between being and relative being appears in a new light if it is placed in the context of a modal Ontology. Essence cannot be without the relative nor being without the entity, because the modal relation—granted that one can speak here of a relation—passes between the entity and its identity with itself, between the singularity that has the name Emma and her being-called Emma. Modal Ontology has its place in the primordial fact—which Aristotle merely presupposed without thematizing it—that being is always already said: to on legetai . . . Emma is not the particular individuation of a universal human essence, but insofar as she is a mode, she is that being for whom it is a matter, in her existence, of her having a name, of her being in language*.” (Agamben, 2017., 1178).

Life' is not a presupposition of language. 'Living' is something that is only a possibility for us because we are always already risking ourselves in language. Instead of asking 'how should I live?, we should try to understand how we are already *said to be 'living'*. We must always ask through whom do we live, and what does this demands of us? The central philosophical questions therefore are not Kantian ones such as 'who am I' or 'what can I do'? These questions already imply that I already exist as an entity separately form my capacities or my linguistic being. The questions are rather those that emerge

from the understanding that the world precedes the subject: Who is calling on me? What am I being called'? What is being done to me? How am I already implicated in my possibilities and impossibilities?

In reversal of the Heideggerian fetishisation of death as the basis of worldly concern, this attitude understands that in order to think of death I must already acknowledge that I am somehow alive. I must acknowledge that there is something that precedes me and as such 'knows' more about who I am than I ever could. Philosophy, instead of calling upon us to engage in an examination of conscience, introspection or to revel in personal experience or the accumulation of culture, calls upon us to respond to what we are or what we are not capable of.

At this point we need to ask what is the appropriate linguistic term or vocabulary to describe the being of language of a modality? What kind of modal verbs express an ethical reflexive relation to oneself that, without presupposing a subject is also fully determined by language? How do we speak of a gesture of testimony? To describe this kind of use of language Agamben turns to Spinoza and his use of the 'active reflexive' verb. It is worth quoting the long passage in full in order to understand how Spinoza conceived of this peculiar linguistic existence, which is not natural for those of us consigned to the use of globalised English:

"*In his Compendium grammaticus linguae hebraeae, Spinoza illustrates the concept of immanent cause — that is, an action in which agent and patient are one and the same person — with the Hebrew verbal categories of the active reflexive and the infinitive noun," Since it often happens," he writes, referring to the infinitive noun, "that the agent and the patient are one and the same person, the Jews found it necessary to form a new and seventh kind of infinitive with which to express an action referred both to the agent and the patient, an action that thus has the form both of an activity and a passivity. It was therefore necessary to invent another kind of infinitive, expressing an action referred to the agent as immanent cause, which, as we have seen, means 'to visit oneself,' or 'to constitute oneself as visiting' or, finally, 'to show oneself as visiting' (constituere se visitantem, vel denique praebere se visitantem)" . Explaining the meaning of these verbal forms, Spinoza is not satisfied with the reflexive form "to visit oneself," and is compelled to form the striking syntagm "to constitute oneself as visiting" or "to show oneself as visiting" (he could also have written "to constitute or show oneself as visited"). Just as in ordinary language, to define someone who takes pleasure in undergoing something (or who is somehow an accomplice to this undergoing) one says that he "gets himself done" something (and not simply that something " is done to him"), so the coincidence of agent and*

*patient in one subject has the form not of an inert identity, but of a complex movement of auto-affection in which the subject constitutes — or shows — itself as passive (or active), such that activity and passivity can never be separated, revealing themselves to be distinct in their impossible coincidence in a self.* "(Agamben, 2017, 835).

To be unable to coincide as a 'self' means to be 'bespoken' in such a way that we come to terms with a certain impotentiality or impossibility at the core of our very being (see also Vardoulakis 2013). This is why the modal category most central to Agamben's 'profanation' of philosophy and subjectivity is 'impotentiality' – the capacity to not do what we can do.

## The Gesture of Not Doing What We Can Do

Before continuing the discussion of this philosophical meaning of impotentiality, it is worth pointing out that its elaboration occurs in the context of Agamben's discussion and dismantling of Aristotle's opposition between Potentiality and Actuality (*Dynamis and Energeia*). Lest we confuse this discussion with an attempt to rehabilitate wholesale the thinker whose works we have subjected to such intense scrutiny, in his elaboration upon the notion Agamben recognises the political stakes of the discussion and states forcefully: "*My concern here is not simply historiographical. I do not intend simply to restore currency to philosophical categories that are no longer in use. On the contrary, I think the concept of potentiality has never ceased to function in the life of humanity, most notably in the part of humanity that has grown and developed its potency to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet*" (Agamben, 2000, 177).

What does it mean then to say something like "This is impossible" or "I cannot"? and how is this discussion related to planetary domination?

In his discussion, Agamben argues that Aristotle distinguished between two senses of potentiality. On the one hand there is the potential of each person to know something or do something they have not yet acquired or done: "I can potentially go swimming tomorrow". This kind of potentiality is immaterial and speculative and is totally dependent on actualisation; I will only resolve it tomorrow

and hence it will either disappear as a potential or recede into a past speculation and lose its possibility altogether.

But there is another kind of potentiality that Agamben finds in Aristotle which is interesting for our purposes. This is the kind of potentiality that does not exhaust itself in actuality but maintains itself as potentiality, as a kind of 'privation' or incapacity that we carry with us and endure. One example is someone who already knows a craft or an art. When a piano player does not play the piano, it cannot be said of them that they do not know how to play the piano, but rather that they remain suspended in a potential to play - they exhibit their impotentiality. In this way potentiality survives in separation from its actualisation. Impotentiality is therefore the capacity to not do something that we otherwise 'can' or 'must'. It is not an inability, but a capacity to not be able.

Beyond the banal logical examples and the detailed elaboration of Aristotle's polemics against his critics, Agamben links this notion to a kind of doctrine of 'freedom' that unlike liberal freedom, does not rely on a subject or a will, but manifests itself through an incapacity to be something or someone. We are used to thinking of power as something that restricts us or that forces us to be in a particular way. For liberal ideology, power is a negative force, something that restricts the 'natural freedom or right' of the individual. For a critic of liberalism like Foucault, power was a positive force that shaped and governed human beings into identities and practices that served economic and administrative purposes. In relation to these notions we therefore have two according notions of freedom, which Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished as 'positive' or 'negative – in short, the power to avoid that which restricts us, or the power to become something that is important to us or defines us (Berlin, 1958). We recognise the notion of 'negative freedom' today in the demands for 'human rights' as a bulwark against the abuse of private and personal freedoms, and that of 'positive freedom' in the manufacturing, marketing and fetishising of 'identity' , which Nietzsche had described as a symptom of nihilism that forces human beings who cannot bare to be nothing to desperately try to be something at all costs.

In the context of contemporary society Agamben argues that "*there is, nevertheless, another and more insidious operation of power that does not immediately affect what human beings can do – their potentiality-but rather their "impotentiality", that is what they cannot do, or better can not do".* (Agamben, 2001, 43). From this perspective, contemporary political and economic power operates not only through restriction of freedom or the construction of ever rigid 'identities' but through denying us the capacity to not be or not do anything. In our society of total cultural and humanitarian

mobilisation, "*separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today's man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial 'no problem' and his irresponsible "I can do it", precisely when he should instead realise that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control*" (Agamben, 2001, 44).

Corresponding to this form of power that separates us from what we can not do is a form of 'freedom' or mode of being which counters it. As we saw above, Aristotle demonstrated that for each power to do, each potentiality, there is a corresponding inability or incapacity to do: an impotentiality. This means that human beings are both capable of being something and at the same time incapable of being something. So "*this exposes them, more than any other living being, to the risk of error; but, at the same time, it permits human beings to accumulate and freely master their own capacities, to transform them into "faculties". It is not only the measure of what someone can do, but also and primarily the capacity of maintaining one-self in relation to one's own possibility to not do, that defines the status of one's action.*" (Agamben, Ibid.).

Indeed, in a society of enforced flexibility, any activity or vocation remains temporary, performative and meaningless in its exchangeability with all other such ways to live a 'Life'. Without disregarding the real efforts and struggles of other human beings, when 'Life' is reduced to a generic substance that unites the species only insofar as it separates us from one another, all activities are reduced to 'life-styles' that seem to be taken up with more and more vigour and jealousy the less and less they are effective in guaranteeing happiness or causing any significant cultural or political impact. For this reason, anyone who dares to take a stand and act out their beliefs is either labelled a fundamentalist or their actions are reduced in the eyes of others to nothing but a 'personal project', 'temporary phase' or futile rebellion.

But perhaps, as Agamben seems to suggest "*those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; the still can not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist. And just as it is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or can not, do that gives consistency to our actions."* (Agamben, 2004, 45).

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested that settler society is trapped in an ontology of property and criminality that renders them unable to account for their own history. This leaves settlers unable to answer the question indigenous tribes demand that they to answer – 'who are you and where do

you come from'? We saw how settler-colonisers are trapped in an irreconcilable ontological double bind: If they claim that they are from here then they can do so only by effacing those who they have supplanted and annihilated in order to take their place, and if they claim that they do not originally belong here they admit that they have no other relationship to land then through the same expropriation and raise the question of why they are here in the first place.

Settlers have no other mode of being than as 'occupiers' but they cannot access this 'no other but' except, if they have not already despaired, through denial, covering it over with identities and cultural celebrations of 'difference'. Settler are stuck in precisely this demand to not realise their incapacity they are separated from what they cannot do; they are nothing but a 'bare life' but pretend that they are something more, something 'free' They are occupiers, but they are denied the possibility of recognising this and cannot honestly realise this capacity to be an occupier so as to able to *not* be it.

How are we to gain access to our impotentiality and learn how to 'not be' occupiers? Can the profanation of philosophy along the lines Agamben articulates assist us in our task to move beyond the dead end of settler identity? Can his philosophy restore a voice to our 'bare life'?

Agamben has affirmed that *"we can grasp the fundamental influence of alphabetic writing on our culture and on the way in which it has conceived of language"* (Agamben, 2018b, 20). On the one hand his critique of Grammar is carried out by exposing how alphabetisation entails the capture of the human voice. On the other, the consequences of alphabetisation that led to the belief in the autonomy of language (self-reference and the emptiness of the pronoun) are exploited as "cultural achievements". This tension is maintained in the two major themes guiding Agamben's practice: the political and practical task of "profanation" and the ethical practice of "testimony".

His attempt to evade the capture of the voice in language has led him in more recent publications to foreclose the possibility of finding a a way beyond 'our culture' of alphabetisation, opting instead for a 'different relation to letters' (see Agamben, 2108b) At other times his practice of messianic profanation seems to resemble a call for libertarian evasion of state and economic administration in the name of the 'destituent' power of autonomous communities (Agamben, 2017, 1265-1280) As to what these communities are supposed to dedicate themselves to following their liberation remains unclear. What is clear is that Agamben is unwilling or unable to call upon his readers to assume any historical or political vocation beyond liberating themselves from administrative power. Perhaps unwilling to entertain the reversibility of the consequences of alphabetisation, or perhaps due to not

sufficiently overcoming his debt to Heidegger, Agamben is unwilling to depart entirely from the atmosphere of contemporary post-historical European intellectual culture. Agamben seems to take as a fait accompli the situation of language "at the end of its itinerary" and embraces post-historical nihilism (Agamben 2000). Agamben abandons the search for a historical vocation for humanity or a determined political or ethical task beyond the self-reflexive 'witnessing' of language. As he puts it, ethics is only possible if there is *"no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realis*e" (Agamben, 1993,42).This celebration of contemporary post-historical life is justified for him because it is *"the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if human beings were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would only be tasks to be done*"(Agamben, Ibid.).

Should we remain satisfied with our apparent 'lack of vocation' and accept, as an astute thinker recently claimed, that Agamben's efforts amount to nothing more than a 'pathos of testimony"? (Whyte 2013, 86). Is it possible to preserve the notion of a philosophical way of life within the split linguistic structure inherited from the philosophical tradition of Grammar? Or should we abandon the attempt to establish an ethics and a practice on the basis of the philosophical tradition?

Let us listen more carefully.

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# Decolonisation: In the Name of What?

In the manifesto, '*The Being of the Occupier'*, with which I began my reflections, the authors argue that the demand made upon us by the tribal and indigenous men and women of settler states requires "not that we retain possession of our material world but that we detach from it in order, ultimately, to regain the lost integrity of our subjectivity. The circumstances of the onto-pathology of white Australian being call for this sort of radical response in order for white Australians to accept and announce the emptiness of our empty being. Naming our being as empty and thereby iving a truthful account of our origins is ultimately to take responsibility for ourselves and for our actions as a collective". (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos 2014, 105).

This means that the incapacity we must regain, the act of resistance we must undertake, is the recognition of our emptiness. For the authors of the manifesto, this can only mean that we bear witness to this emptiness by offering unconditional surrender: "For white Australians then our surrender to the sovereign Indigenous peoples is indispensable to gaining presence, the presence that is the fundamental precondition for engaging with our world. Of course, in order to achieve this, we must have both the courage to reject the imperative of whiteness, the imperative to 'act as if the land were initially without owners', as well as the vision to respond to the Ontological command that the current times direct to property-owning subjectivity, the call to "be as a person and respect others as person" (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, Ibid.).

We can now see how Agamben's ethics of testimony offers a response to the demand for a surrender to Indigenous peoples. To become a witness to the unspeakable is a form of speech which we offered to designate by the term 'to be bespoken'. This capacity to be 'bespoken' by language, due to the desubjectification it entails, consigns us to something that we cannot assume. It consigns us to an impossibility or incapacity as a tension between the activity of speaking and the passivity of 'being spoken': "*Passivity, as the form of subjectivity, is thus constitutively fractured into a purely receptive pole (the Muselmann) and an actively passive pole (the witness), but in such a way that this fracture never leaves itself, fully separating the two poles. On the contrary, it always has the form of an intimacy, of being consigned to a passivity, to a making oneself passive in which the two terms are both distinct and inseparable… Here what is revealed is the analogy with shame, defined as being consigned to a passivity that cannot be assumed. Shame, indeed, then appears as the most proper*

*emotive tonality of subjectivity* (…) *The self is what is produced as a remainder in the double movement — active and passive — of auto-affection. This is why subjectivity constitutively has the form of subjectification and desubjectification; this is why it is, at bottom, shame.* (Agamben, 2017, 835-836*).*

What are we said to be ashamed of? In whose name do we give testimony? Is it the genocide, the massacres and the neglect? All these occurred and, in many ways, keep on occurring. But it is shameful to offer nothing but shame to those who demand that we listen. To say that we have to feel ashamed of this would be to incorporate these events into our own conscience, to turn them into something that belongs more to what we 'did' than something that happened to those who were massacred or is happening to those who remain.

Is it then our own ignorance we should be ashamed of? Or is it our own lack of 'being'? Perhaps, but once again this would be an act of ethical narcissism, leading to empty gestures like apologies, welcome to country ceremonies, declarations of recognition of 'traditional owners' (an affront to a culture that has no conception of ownership) - all actions aimed at nothing else but soothing our conscience.

After all, *"it is in fact not enough for the one who speaks to say things that are true and express shared opinion. For his speech to be really heard, it has to speak in the name of something. In every discussion, in every discourse, in the final analysis the decisive question is, in the name of what are you speaking*?" (Agamben, 2017c, 64).

For those of us who would not dare or can no longer speak in the name of GOD, or in the name of a 'nation' or mere 'ideal' and would never to presume to speak in our own name, this is a difficult question. It is also difficult for philosophers, who for more than two thousand years claimed to master language for the sake of 'speaking of Being'. Unless speaking in the name of some kind of academic discipline, or personal experience what is left for the philosopher to speak in the name of? What can he or she testify to?

As I demonstrated above, the paradox of testimony demands of us a form of desubjectification; risking ourselves in the gap between life and language. At the end of its history, with the recognition of the emptiness of our language, philosophical practice must move beyond the exhibition of the taking pace of language as a norm or a ground that regulates discourse or dialogue. This only results in the paradox

of an impossibility of speaking – leading again and again to the apparent 'end of philosophy'. To profane philosophy is therefore to return language back to human use, not for the sake of articulating afresh that which has already been said again and again but to give language back to human beings for the sake of something 'which has never been written' something that has not yet been said. Philosophy must offer the possibility of total desubjectification or it must remain silent.

Perhaps what is demanded of us is to cease the search for a name for the sake of which we speak. Perhaps the 'risk' we must assume through language is to remain caught in the suspension of subjectivity until we are 'named' by something other than our post-historical and empty language. This can only mean that *we must bear witness to our incapacity to bear witness* – we can no longer say what it is that we cannot say. We can no longer speak for ourselves and can no longer name what we are.

Therefore, the tribal men and women, in their demand that we recognise our being as occupiers, are *our* witnesses. Through their struggle and survival, they give testimony to our lack of being. They speak for our incapacity to name who we are when they affirm that *they* have survived and that *we* are nothing but what remains to be named. It is to them that we must turn for words to say.

The profanation of philosophy demands of us to testify to our emptiness. Accepting our suspension in language, our incapacity to speak, we can actualise our impotentiality only in the mode of unconditional surrender. Our language must be profaned and handed over to the free use of tribal men and women, hoping that they name us anew and tell us who we are. The end of philosophy can in this way become the end of settler existence.

In terms of Agamben's philosophy we are called to risk ourselves and be-spoken by and within language in order to recover an impotentiality of speech. This impotentiality is best revealed through the way in which language uncovers its own limits in self-reference. The previous chapters of this thesis have shown that the exposition of language in self-reference is in fact the revelation of the historical yet ever present structural *arche* of our language – the limits of language are in fact the limits placed on it by alphabetic notation. To recover the impotentiality of language as an act of speech is to learn how to point within language to the possibility of its not being captured by phonetic transcription.

This thesis began with a definition of philosophical therapy as that which transmits a tradition only by betraying it. Respecting our heritage after the historical unfolding of alphabetisation, what has

traditionally been called ‘philosophy’, has come to an end can only mean to betray it. The thesis will end then by performing an act of self-reference, which by emptying out the subject of discourse, bears witness to the possibility of a language beyond the semiotic paradigm. After there is nothing left for us to say, there is still one way in which ‘being’ can be said. Risking ourselves in an ‘*experimentum linguae’*, there is one final modal stance we can assume and utter as our last ‘profanatory’ gesture:

I (can) surrender.

We surrender.

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